UNIT 1 APPROACHING THE NOVEL

Structure

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Introduction

1.2 The Creation of *Middlemarch*

1.3 The Prelude to *Middlemarch*

1.4 Let Us Sum Up

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to a) major critical approaches to *Middlemarch* and b) give you an insight into the link between George Eliot's life and some important issues in the novel. At first sight, the voluminous text of *Middlemarch* can be a little intimidating. Yet, read with systematic attention, the book gives pleasure and also instruction. The first Unit will help you develop familiarity with the methods adopted by Eliot throughout the book.

1.1 INTRODUCTION: HOW TO APPROACH *MIDDLEMARCH*

> "And what are you reading, Miss —?
> "Oh ! it is only a novel"
> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Ch.5.

Jane Austen's ironic dismissal of "only a novel" should alert us to the serious intention behind the statement. Speaking for a generation of readers, Austen, with wry humour, exaggerated the expectations that a novel was required to fulfil as "some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (*Northanger Abbey*, Ch.5). Whether a novel measures up to such demanding criteria or not is often a matter of individual response and ideological subject positions. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* from the time it was published in 1871 has attracted strong and controversial opinions from leading critics of English literature.

At the very outset, George Eliot's contemporary Henry James, a prolific writer and an astute theoretician of the novel, published a review grounded on measured statements:

> "*Middlemarch* is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels....We can well remember how keenly we wondered, while its earlier chapters unfolded themselves, what turn in the way of form the story may take—that of an organised, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction, or a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan. We expected the actual result, but for the sake of English imaginative

literature ... we hoped for the other.... But that pleasure has still to hover between prospect and retrospect....*Middlemarch* is a treasure house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole".

However, while moving his focus from form to content, James was enchanted with the social realism, of "people, solid and vivid in their varying degrees ...a deeply human little world." He was equally impressed by George Eliot's "broad reach of vision," the "brain, in a word, behind her observation." But in analysing the totality of the novel, Henry James, like many others after him, could not reconcile the diversities contained in the plenitude of *Middlemarch.* He concluded his review with a perplexed query, "If we write novels so, how shall we write History?" (Henry James, *Galaxy*, March 1873)

A similar "doubleness" has marked the opinions of other famous critics, and you may have to decide upon your own preferences as you discover the ways in which the novel can be addressed by various methodological tools of analysis. There is no "right" or "wrong" assessment of a book such as *Middlemarch* but it must be based on informed and thoughtful understanding. Virginia Woolf, for instance, claimed for *Middlemarch* the status of "the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 Nov. 1919) but left it to others to work out the implications of her claim. We notice, however, that the emphasis on form and content has shifted to the subject of ethics in adult relationships.

Later critics tended to see form, content, ethics and morality as inextricably linked in George Eliot's art. Consequently, competing views about the novel debated how the "moral pattern" is to be worked out in a novel where the author keeps firm control not only indirectly as an omniscient narrator but directly through interventions addressing the readers. You will find Eliot telling the reader how to interpret a character, how to link an individual story to a "universal" design, in fact, she offers reasons for apportioning praise and blame. Several readers resent such controlling authority while others are quite comfortable with accepting George Eliot's professed views. Of the books which favour the "classic-realism" of the novel are W.J. Harvey's *The Art of George Eliot* (1961) and Barbara Hardy's *The Novels of George Eliot* (1959). Both speak of the exquisite interrelatedness of characters and episodes, which creates a level of verisimilitude and grants access to the fictional time of the novel. In Barbara Hardy's words, "In *Middlemarch*... we feel the pressure of an enormous number of human beings, similar and dissimilar, modifying the doctrines of the novelist as well as contributing to them." (p.143)

While a majority of the critics in the 195.'s and 60's condoned the traditions of a third person narrative wherein the many didactic, speculative and summarizing passages found appropriate place, new critical theory of the last two decades has tended to dismantle the authorial "authority" of George Eliot and other nineteenth century novelists. Influential essays by Terry Eagleton and J. Hillis Miller have argued that *Middlemarch* is fraught with discontinuities and disjunctions which George Eliot is strenuously forcing into an artificial balance. Some of these tensions can be attributed to Eliot's problematic relation with the Church and the consequent debates in her mind about secular values versus religious values and the conflict of social obligation with individual fulfillment. Furthermore arose the question of "humanism" deriving from the intellectual influence of Feuerbach and other "positivist" thinkers who gave enormous significance to the play of destiny and scientific rationalism. More details about these philosophical movements will come to you later in the lessons. Meanwhile it is important to note that new interpretations of *Middlemarch* deconstruct the text by challenging its obvious surface meanings by keeping in view that the author too is constructed by a series of personal and intellectual experiences.

Terry Eagleton's sophisticated reading finds George Eliot attempting to recast "historical contradictions into ideologically resolvable form." Commenting on the contradiction, he says that " The Religion of Humanity protects Romantic values against aggressive rationalism; but by rooting those values in the human collective, it defends them equally against an unbridled individualism." Eagleton further alleges "a discrepancy between what the novel claims and what it shows." J. Hillis Miller's brilliant deconstructive arguments would also have us believe that there is an irreconcilable gap in the novel's language and thinking, an example of which is that the metaphors of connectedness—the web and the stream—are undermined by a number of optical images of refraction and illusion.

Dazzling as these arguments are in their sharpness of enquiry, they too can be refuted by an equal exercise of deconstructive reasoning. This is demonstrated in David Lodge's recent essay on *Middlemarch* which sees strength, not weakness, in the ambiguities: "It is precisely because the narrator's discourse is never entirely unambiguous, predictable, and in total interpretive control of the other discourses in *Middlemarch* that the novel survives, to be read and re-read, without ever being closed or exhausted."

A different direction for approaching the novel is suggested by feminists who offer another range of interpretations. Chronologically, the earlier critics were likely to see feminism as a "muted" presence in *Middlemarch* wherein patriarchal structures controlled the choices available to women. According to this view, George Eliot was sympathetic to the plight of aspiring women who could fulfill their ambitions only through the agency of men but she prepared no ground for radical shifts in gender or societal relations. Also a troubling contrast was noted between the acceptances enacted by her heroines and George Eliot's own defiance of traditional, restrictive forces. Zelda Austen's essay "Why Feminist Critics are Angry with George Eliot" (1976) sums up the arguments upto a point. Thereafter feminist readings of *Middlemarch* have often investigated the text from a socio-psychological base to discover Eliot's questioning of dominant structures where women are denied active and constructive roles in society. Such a text, while apparently presenting the ideals of social accord, draws attention to the underpinnings of gender inequity. Showing "harmony" as a precariously balanced condition resting upon a woman's deference to social form, the text subverts institutions such as marriage and family on which conventions are grounded. Seen in such a way, the author, far from being complicit and complacent, is a troubled being assigning her own signature to a cunning tale of feminist consciousness raising.

Middlemarch is, undoubtedly, a richly textured novel which has also gathered a staggering variety of critical opinions over time. Fortunately, it is an eminently readable novel, as you will discover, filled as it is with lively characters, events and dialogues. While the author directs the novel through a careful and immaculate structuring, she also leaves sufficient room for the readers to exercise their interpretive choices. Perhaps the following broad questions need to be addressed. **First**, why does the novel attract so much admiration as well as criticism? **Second**, to what extent does *Middlemarch* belong to history and still escape the constraints of time? **Third**, how effectively is the woman's question delineated in the exploration of gender relations presented in the novel? And **finally**, how does the structure contribute to the complexity of the issues, themes and ideologies debated in the novel?

1.2 THE CREATION OF *MIDDLEMARCH*

On 1 January 1869, George Eliot set herself numerous tasks, among them was the writing of "a novel called *Middlemarch*" (Eliot's *Journal*). The composition developed slowly, painstakingly, as a cluster of events formed around Lydgate, a doctor in a provincial town. Eliot may have been attempting to recapitulate her own encounters in such a community as she "meditated characters and conditions" (Eliot's

Journal, 1 September, 1869). A brief account of her life will help to understand the context in which Eliot was writing.

Born Mary Ann Evans in 1819, George Eliot asserted her intellectual acumen in her translations, her journalistic writing and her extraordinary novels composed during her long and unusual life. Mary Ann began her scholar's life as a pious young woman in boarding school but she soon had to return home upon her mother's death to keep house for her father in Coventry. In the years of sudden responsibility and consequent maturing, she read extensively into the relationship between the Bible and Science and learned to question traditional piety. She broke with her father because she refused to attend Church. Among the people who influenced Mary Ann's rebellion against orthodoxy were the freethinker Charles Bray, the writer Charles Hennell and the publisher John Chapman. However their friendship with the unusually gifted young woman was often misinterpreted by society.

Later, Mary Evans met the famous journalist George Henry Lewes who guided her readings in philosophy, religion and history and invited her to express her views on several controversial subjects. By 1854, Evans decided to defy convention and live openly with Lewes, himself caught in a difficult marriage which he could not annul. There was a good deal of gossip by which Evans was isolated from her family in Warwickshire. That she was convinced about her decision is evident in her letter to a friend, " Women who are content with light and easily broken ties do *not* act as I have done." In all but the legal sense it was a "marriage" and the partnership continued happily until the death of Lewes in 1878. They shared learning and scholarship, read each others works and gained by their intellectual and emotional bond. Using the philosophic debates of the time to transform the aesthetics of narrative fiction, Mary Evans, calling herself "George Eliot," launched her new professional and personal identity as the author of *Scenes from Clerical Life* (1858). Eliot's major novels appeared with industrious regularity, *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Tragedy struck in the sudden death of Lewes in 1878. George Eliot devoted herself to completing his manuscripts but it was obvious that she was dispirited and lonely. Two years later, rather surprisingly, she married John Walter Cross, a financial adviser who was twenty one years younger than her. George Eliot passed away in the same year in December.

Eliot's novels, though holding to a common theme of exploring the limits of provincial society, are wonderfully diverse in the treatment of the subject. Each book was a challenge on how to depict the interplay between environment and moral choice. As the *Journals* show, the writing of *Middlemarch* was not easy. On New Year's Day in 1869, the fledgling novel stood still; George Eliot was paralysed by a writer's block that she could hardly comprehend. On 11 September, in the same year, she noted in her *Journal*, "I do not feel very confident that I can make anything satisfactory of *Middlemarch*". Another year went by. She began a story tentatively titled "Miss Brooke" and wrote a hundred "good printed pages" in about two months. Working deeply into the psychological compulsions of an idealistic young woman, George Eliot's creative energies seem to have found liberation and a rallying point. Much later, the astute critic F.R. Leavis was to say, "George Eliot tends to identify herself with Dorothea, though Dorothea is far from being the whole of George Eliot." (*The Great Tradition*, 1948)

By the spring of 1871, George Eliot had worked out a sketch for combining the two stories. The ardent woman in whom Eliot saw the likeness of St. Theresa had this in common with Lydgate of *Middlemarch* — they were both visionaries, gifted with a sense of vocation and service. She had realism enough to perceive that society did not always grant such people the opportunity to exercise their chosen roles. In her art, however, George Eliot found the commonality of purpose a useful linking device in the stories of Lydgate and Dorothea Brooke. The manner in which she dovetailed the narratives in Chapter 10 is sheer genius. Miss Brooke's dreams of social

amelioration are articulated within an "old provincial society" that is passing through rapid change and people discuss the achievements of a talented doctor, an outsider to *Middlemarch*, who is seen as a harbinger of modern science. The action is set for the meeting of Lydgate, the new young surgeon who is "wonderfully clever," (Ch.10, p.117) and "the fine girl — but a little too earnest" (Ch.10, p.119).

The narrative possibilities were substantively enhanced by this linkage. No longer focused upon just individuals, the novel envisaged the small town itself as the subject of enquiry. The complex dynamics of class and gender entailed a fullness of treatment that George Eliot and Mr. Lewes decided could best be expressed in bi-monthly instalments spread over approximately two years. George Eliot began writing with energy and confidence, holding firmly to her "design" as she called it, " to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional, and to show this in some directions which have not been from time immemorial the beaten path.... But the best intentions are good for nothing until execution has justified them". (George Eliot's letter to John Blackwood, 24 July, 1871). Though occasionally beset by a nervous fear and a bout of unspecified " illness," Eliot met her remarkable schedule of completing the installments in time.

Reviews of *Middlemarch* were largely favourable though Mr. Lewes is said to have monitored how much the author was to see. He kept away all but the "occasional quotation" from George Eliot. She, nonetheless, expressed her curiosity in rather oblique terms, saying, "Though *Middlemarch* seems to have made a deep impression in our own country, and though the critics were as polite and benevolent as possible to me, there has not, I believe, been one really able review of the book in our newspapers and periodicals." (George Eliot's letter to Charles Ritter, 11 February 1873). The truth is that extensive, and perceptive reviews had appeared in leading papers such as the *Spectator*, *Athenaeum*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and *The Academy*. Henry James's famous double-edged review in *Galaxy* was to appear a month after George Eliot's observation.

It is worth noting that from 1872 until now, *Middlemarch* has received continuous literary attention. While its value in " the great tradition" has been debated, its canonised status in the mainstream of English writing has never been questioned.

1.3 THE PRELUDE TO *MIDDLEMARCH* : SAINT THERESA AND MISS BROOK

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa (25).

The novel opens with a statement of connection between a sixteenth century Carmelite nun, Saint Theresa of Avila, and Dorothea Brooke, the central figure in the story of *Middlemarch*. George Eliot directs the reader's attention to exceptional women, their state of "spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity" (25) a circumstance that presages tragedy. At the same time she avows her support of such "passionate ideal nature." The problematics of Eliot's authorial voice are at once released for consideration. Will Dorothea develop a novelistic reality of her own which can be freely interpreted by the reader of *Middlemarch* or will Eliot exercise authorial power to insist upon an indulgence towards Dorothea's acts of commission and omission?

To begin a discussion, we first need an explanation of the reference. St.Theresa, whose original name was Teresa De Cepeda Y Ahumada, was born in 1515 in Avila and spent her life in Spain practicing and preaching a doctrine of austere, contemplative life. She is remembered as one of the great mystics of the Roman Catholic Church, a woman leader and also the author of several spiritual classics. As

the initiator of the Carmelite Order, she sought to restore and emphasise the original observances of poverty and abstinence as the nuns dedicated themselves to the service of the community. She staunchly insisted upon subsistence only through public alms thus ensuring active contact between the workers and society.

You will notice that the Prelude to *Middlemarch* picturises a scene of a "little girl walking forth one morning hand in hand with her still smaller brother.....wide-eyed and helpless-looking as two fawns, but with human hearts, already beating to a national idea"(25). Historical sources do not endorse this completely. Teresa was fourteen years old when she lost her mother, and despite her father's opposition, she entered a convent when she was probably twenty. Recent books such as Alison Weber's *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (1990) present her as actively protesting the familial and religious controls rather than yielding passively to domestic sanctions.

George Eliot was, of course, using aspects of the St. Theresa legend as it suited her purpose, and here, in the Prelude, she wished to foreground the circumscribed conditions within which exceptional women must function. She is therefore modifying historical details which, in the case of religious leaders, are often mystified by tradition.

Examine, for example, the details in the following off-quoted passage:

> Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, a foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed. (26)

"Foundress of nothing" is not quite correct. St.Theresa established and nurtured more than sixteen convents in Spain and inspired St. John of the Cross to initiate Carmelite Reform for men. Though she had her detractors, some powerful enough to curtail her reformist activities for a time, she had influential supporters too in King Philip II of Spain and Pope Gregory XIII. George Eliot could not see into the future, but it is interesting for us to note that in 1970, Pope Paul VI honoured St.Theresa as the first woman to be elevated as a doctor of the Church. St. Theresa did not pass into the kind of oblivion suggested in the Prelude. George Eliot's point however remains acceptable that such women struggle against external circumstances.

We can further consider if there is a biographical reason for Eliot's attraction to women who exemplify a "soul hunger." F.R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* offers a categorical statement:

> The weakness of the book, as already intimated, is in Dorothea. We have the danger signal in the very outset, in the brief 'Prelude'....In the description of the 'soul-hunger' that leads Dorothea to see Casaubon so fantastically as a 'winged messenger' we miss the poise that had characterized the presentment of her at her introduction.... Aren't we here, we wonder, in sight of an unqualified self-identification? Isn't there something dangerous in the way the irony seems to be reserved for the provincial background and circumstances, leaving the heroine immune? Dorothea, to put it another way, is a product of George Eliot's own 'soul-hunger'—another day-dream ideal self. This persistence, in the midst of so much that is so other, of an unreduced enclave of the old immaturity is disconcerting in the extreme.

F.R.Leavis is placing emphasis upon his own preferences in fiction insofar that he values "maturity" as a transcendence of an adolescent day-dreaming condition. The argument is a familiar one in nineteenth century fiction where themes are often worked by means of a chronological trajectory denoting a transition from innocence to experience, ignorance to knowledge, or even romance to realism.

Laurence Lerner in *The Truthtellers* challenges assumptions about what constitutes emotional maturity. (You will remember that Virginia Woolf called *Middlemarch* a novel for "grown-up people"). According to Lerner:

> The disagreement between Leavis and George Eliot is in fact an ethical one. The heart of Leavis's criticism does not concern falsity in the author's vision, but in the value of the Theresa-complex....I want to shift the emphasis not towards stressing the irony with which Dorothea is portrayed, but defending Saint Theresa against the concept (a central one in Leavis's criticism) of maturity. The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, *does* change the lights for us; loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness ought to have a more complex fate, as the adolescent matures, than simply to be outgrown; and maturity is a virtue within the range of some very dreary people, and beyond the range of some very fine ones. Leavis, in short, has made not an artistic criticism but an ethical criticism.

The shift one notices is the application of everyday ethics to the novel. In such a situation the novel is seen more as a reflection of the real world than as an art form. One should remember, however, that the "verisimilitude" or adherence to "realism" belongs to an imaginatively created realm of fiction. While there are aesthetic considerations and an internal logic of form, the world of the novel cannot be subjected to absolutist statements on morality and ethics that belong to the discourse of social interaction in a given historical time.

Arnold Kettle is yet another critic drawn into the discussions of the St.Theresa metaphor for Dorothea. The author's biography creeps into this analysis too:

> The day dream aspect of Dorothea which Dr. Leavis has emphasised is a very basic limitation. But this quality, this sense we have of idealization, of something completely realised, is due, I suggest, not so much to any subjective cause, some emotional immaturity in George Eliot herself...as to the limitations of her philosophy, her social understanding. Dorothea represents that element in human experience for which in the deterministic universe of mechanist materialism there is no place — the need of man to change the world he inherits.

Kettle, as you see, has a tendency to universalize the subject. Therefore, Dorothea's particular instance becomes expanded to a vast dimension that encompasses a hypothetical fundamental need, "the need of man to change the world." I am uncomfortable with such a broad-basing of a literary argument. The subject position of a character is best reviewed in the context of the immediate story. While the text is finite, the reading of the contents will undergo change as readers impose their own interventions born of their own experience of a changing world. This, to some extent explains the diversity of opinion that is advanced towards all major novels. However, with the new critical, theoretical tools available to us now, we should grant autonomy to the text and work our way through the interplay of historical and trans-historical interpretations. While paying attention to obvious linkages between text and author, we should also leave room for challenging or subverting the obvious surface constructions of the text.

For instance, a feminist approach to the initial paragraphs of *Middlemarch* will make us notice how far we are expected to move from George Eliot's professed focus on the woman question of which Dorothea is an illustrative example. The Prelude, by speaking of "the history of man," sees this as a frame for the unrecorded heroism of women. Delving further into psychological terrain Eliot astutely remarks that the "common yearning of womanhood" is often a vague ideal. The subtext that we read through feminism helps us comprehend that the vagueness, or lack of formulation, is caused by woman's subservient position in the hierarchical structures, be they secular or religious. In conjoining the tales of the historically positioned St. Theresa and the imaginatively constructed Dorothea on a common plane of gendered oppression, Eliot makes the story not "universal" but pertinent to a key aspect of the woman question. Sally Shuttleworth plays with the title *Middlemarch* to say:

> The Prelude poses the question of how originality can survive within an environment whose essence, as the title suggests, is its middlingness. The question is not, however, an innocent one. The form in which the problem is expressed also defines the terms of its ideal resolution....The passage is not simply a lament for a departed era; it simultaneously defines the values that will structure the narrative and the model of social and individual development to which George Eliot adheres.

From the above discussion, you would notice that the brief Prelude is dense in structure, its many echoes of history preparing us for the lengthy narrative ahead. A fascinating complex of relationships is worked out against an intellectual understanding of forces determining individual and social form. *Middlemarch* rewards the reader at every page by involving and respecting an engagement with the flow of the story.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

Middlemarch has fascinated several generations of readers, both men and women. In the earliest interpretations, it was read as a classic-realist text, as a consequence of which critics judged the plot and the characters by their adherence to the "truth" of life. Sometimes the life experiences of George Eliot were used to understand the main theme of the novel as it speaks about idealistic, impassioned women like St. Theresa who hoped to bring about social change. Later critics have drawn attention to the internal conflicts in *Middlemarch* and suggested that George Eliot was using the artifice of the novel to raise an important question about the limitations placed upon women by customary and institutional controls. The story of St. Theresa links Dorothea to a particular instance in history.

1.5 QUESTIONS

1. What are the arguments justifying the criticism of *Middlemarch* made by Henry James, F.R. Leavis and Arnold Kettle? Discuss.

2. What were the artistic problems facing George Eliot as she began composing *Middlemarch?*

3. Give a brief sketch about the life of St. Theresa. What is her connection with Dorothea?

1.6 SUGGESTED READING

Henry James, Review of *Middlemarch.*
F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* 1948,1962.
Arnold Kettle , *An Introduction to the English Novel,* 2 vol., 1951, 1967.

Barbara Hardy ed., *Critical Essays on George Eliot,* 1970.
Kenneth Newton, ed., *George Eliot,* 1990.

UNIT 2 THEMES, CHARACTERS, TECHNIQUES

Structure

2.0 Objectives

2.1 Themes in *Middlemarch*

2.2 The Prime of Miss Brooke

2.3 The Unsuitable Suitor

2.4 The World Beyond

2.4.1 The Outsider

2.4.2 The Angel of Light

2.4.3 A Matter of Money

2.5 The Author in the Text

2.5.1 Many Voices

2.5.2 A Nod at the Literary Tradition

2.5.3 Recalling Plato

2.6 Let Us Sum Up

2.7 Questions

2.8 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This section leads you through Books One and Two of *Middlemarch* with a view to establishing the themes which are worked out in the details of characters. George Eliot's own place in English literary tradition is also examined in the context of her statements on the art of the novel.

2.1 THEMES IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

In reading *Middlemarch*, one can be quite overwhelmed by its size, complexity and dense texture. My suggestion is that we simplify the problem by making notes about different themes in the novel although we must keep in mind the overlaps that are bound to occur between one concern and another. We must also be aware of the manner in which various characters are deployed to explore the themes but must guard against seeing the people as personifications of ideas. In other words, an initial spreadsheet of George Eliot's scheme here is an aid to learning, not a statement of a rigid order. We may quote Barbara Hardy in this context:

> In *Middlemarch*....we feel the pressure of an enormous number of human beings, similar and dissimilar, modifying the doctrines of the novelist as well as contributing to them. George Eliot has a simple and not very varied moral

scheme but her novels are never schematic or rigid in their generalizations about human beings. The human examples are always variations of the theme rather than examples which fit perfectly.

The following list is offered as a suggestion to help you to recognise the main concerns. W.J. Harvey's fine "Introduction" to the Penguin edition of *Middlemarch* gives a further explication of several of these categories.

- **The theme of vocation.** This is mainly illustrated by Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate but has vital connections to Casaubon's failed intellectualism, Bulstrode's fraudulent success, Farebrother's precarious ministry and Mary Garth's caregiving.

- **Marital compatibility** or the lack of it complicates the ideals of vocation for the principal characters. The author, however, critically reviews the processes by which the matrimonial alliances emerge. The complicity of men and women in their arrangements of interdependence is as much responsible for personal tragedy as the illusion of individual choice. Apart from Dorothea and Lydgate, Rosamond Vincy, Casaubon, Will Ladislaw are used to illustrate the gap between dreams and the realm of possibilities.

- **Money and pecuniary interests** are further determining factors. Unlike Henry James (and more akin to the French novelist Gustave Flaubert), George Eliot gives cold facts about the way in which wealth moderates personality. Featherstone's avarice parallels Bulstrode's feigned generosity. Lydgate's idealism flounders on Rosamond's enchantment with beautiful things, what the American writer Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* called the lure of "meritricious beauty." That indifference to wealth is a vague ideal is shown in Dorothea's disregard for Casaubon's money which, nonetheless, effects her moral conscience.

  Birth, rank and class are according to W.J. Harvey, "strongly divisive" as factors "even in so small a society as Middlemarch." The Dorothea-Ladislaw union is forbidden by the violation of a code of propriety. Other subtle forms of social layering are seen in instances relating to the Garth and Vincy families. Fred, a lovable but irresponsible young man, has troubles enough because of his expensive habits for which he has no money. A tragic outcome is that he is almost forced into a religious vocation entirely unsuited to his temperament.

- **Politics**, in the obvious way of a resounding and disrupting "pistol shot in a theatre" in Stendhal's famous metaphor, features nowhere in *Middlemarch*. However, constant references to the Reform Bill bring the politics of social change directly into the novel. Briefly the reference is to the British Parliamentary Bills that became Acts in 1832, 1867 and 1884-85, and which expanded the electorate for the House of Commons and rationalised the representation of that body. Voting privileges were first transferred from small boroughs to thickly populated industrial areas. The later bills widened the voting base substantially by enfranchising less wealthy segments of society. In all, the upper levels of property holders, the nobility and gentry lost their hegemony to democratic forces. *Middlemarch* refers only to the first phase. Mr. Brooke, Sir James Chetham, Mrs. Cadwallader and several others debate the issues pertaining to imminent reforms.

- **Science**. Systems of knowledge, both old and new, are contested, specially, in the realm of scientific discoveries in medicine. Lydgate, who is the outsider and the cosmopolitan, is welcomed into the town for his skill acquired in Europe but he is later suspected of moral turpitude. Dr. Minchin and Dr. Sprague, physicians of the old school, feel threatened by the apparent success

of new knowledge. The contentions are worked out through political affiliations. In the end, Lydgate's dubious fall is caused by several factors, one of which is the conservative resistance of provincial people to new medical discoveries.

Religion. George Eliot rebelled against orthodoxy in all institutions especially the Church. You will recall that as a young woman of twenty three she had declared to her father that she would no longer attend Church. Father and daughter came to an uneasy compromise but the rift in values was irrevocable. Four years after this episode, Mary Ann Evans published, anonymously, *The Life of Jesus Christ Critically Examined.* Given this background, it comes as a surprise that theology is not openly debated in *Middlemarch* although several characters are functionaries of the Church. A range of Anglicanism is presented from the "High and Dry" Tory leanings of Cadwallader to the Evangelicanism of Tyke. Religion and politics merge in the small world of Middlemarch as personal affiliations gain precedence and evoke fierce loyalties. While George Eliot posits her own intellectual enquiries in the novel, she does not insist on privileging one position over another. Irony and subversion serve better to show the limitations of provincial society.

Egotism is an uncomfortable word because tradition has linked it to an excess of pride and vanity. You would know this from your reading of the Bible and Milton's *Paradise Lost.* However, in terms of psychological vocabulary, the term "ego," as Freud and Jung have used it becomes an attribute of normal human behavior, it is the particularized "I" which distinguishes an individual. In modern psychology, therefore, the ego is a self-determining component in the individual will to succeed. Such a context allows us to place Rosamond, Lydgate and Dorothea to a test of honest enquiry into the factors motivating their actions. The characters are not conscious egotists, unlike Gilbert Osmond of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example. However, their clinging to a vision entirely their own to a point of obsessive dedication is a form of self-centredness which fails to see, at times, a dialectical relation between the individual and society.

2.2 . THE PRIME OF "MISS BROOKE"

The story of Miss Brooke began, we remember, as an independent tale. In itself it remains remarkable as an insight into the tenuous, visionary speculations of a young woman on the threshold of marriage and/ or the choice of a vocation. Furthermore, with the integration of this tale into the larger span of Book One of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot made sure that all the important themes in the novel were invoked in one way or another.

Take for instance the question about societal conditions acting upon the lives of the St. Theresa figures; intelligent, farsighted women impelled by the desire to serve the poor and the needy. Book One of *Middlemarch* begins with an epigraph from a play by Beaumont and Fletcher called *The Maid's Tragedy.* The sentences seem to devalue women's lives:

> Since I can do no good because a woman,
> Reach constantly at something that is near it.

As you read the chapter, please review such statements and check if you have any interventions to make in this apparent positioning of Dorothea on a low scale of expectation even as she is admired for an elevated sense of service to the community. What you are asked to perform is an act of "reader response" in the way that the American critic Stanley Fish suggests: "Meanings are not extracted but made and made not by encoded forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being."

Put another way, Fish is inviting the reader to challenge the code made obvious in the language of the text. The reader will bring a subjectivity born of her/his own placement in time and cultural belief and such a subjectivity will interact with the written text. Alternative readings emerge from transactions of this nature. Stanley Fish, however, says that we belong to an "interpretive community" of shared "values" and are conditioned by its parameters, therefore one is not entirely free and cannot be anarchic in rendering textual meaning.

The consequence of such engaged reading can be explained through an example. Consider the following lines:

> Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it . (30)

George Eliot like other nineteenth century novelists, Jane Austen, William Thackeray, Charles Dickens and Henry James tends to direct the reader's imagination by presenting vivid descriptions of a character's outward demeanour and inner personality. It is a manner of establishing a contract between the author and the reader with the text as a factor of exchange. The modern day reader is not willing to remain a passive recipient of authorial control. In fact new critical theory privileges the alternate authority of the reader. Furthering the remarks of Stanley Fish, theoreticians such as Umberto Eco point out that between the intention of the author and the intention of the interpreter, there is a third possibility "there is an intention of the text." In other words, the material in print may generate a complex of meanings which reach beyond the interaction between the writer and the reader. By deciphering the subtext, or, to use another metaphor, by excavating the hidden wealth of meaning, you as reader will enjoy the process of making the text your own.

Now return to the cited passage. George Eliot seems to prophesy tragedy for a woman whose lofty ideas must collide with the limitations of a provincial town. She is likely then to turn self indulgent, a victim in a lost cause, a saint without a constituency. To some extent, the opening pages of *Middlemarch* prognosticate the ending thus robbing the tale of its mystery. If you accept Eliot's description of Dorothea uncritically, the progress of the story is coloured by the image of a defeat in a heroic battle.

What happens when you challenge the proposition and place the blame on society, not the woman? The limitations, then, are not in her idealistic constructions of a better world but in a faulty world out there which is neglectful of kind acts of social amelioration. When the idealising and theorising is done by a young woman, there is the further practical consideration about her class and her marital status. George Eliot's tone in the following passage in ironical, though not without a tinge of empathy

> And how should Dorothea not marry?—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder her but her love of extremes, and her insistence of regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers....Dorothea with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage....The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it (31-32).

2.3 THE UNSUITABLE SUITOR

Almost on cue, Casaubon, an aged scholar almost twenty seven years older than Dorothea, appears on the scene. Surely the driest courtship in literary history is recorded for us in his attentions to Dorothea. Chapter 5 gives us Casaubon's letter of marriage proposal in which he declares in cold, controlled and measured language his attraction for her "elevation of thought and capability of devotedness" (66). Dorothea's theories about marriage as "a state of higher duties" (64) leave her vulnerable to a man such as Casaubon, and she gladly dreams of a life of usefulness as his amanuensis, his intellectual companion and devoted wife.

Notice, in the above context, that Casaubon and Dorothea consider themselves well suited to each other's needs. However, the language of the text has raised doubts in the mind of the reader about the success of this partnership. For one, we bring to bear our own critique about what constitutes compatibility in marriage and can see the potential for disaster if a woman imagines that the husband-wife relationship is pitched only on an intellectual plane. George Eliot had warned us about Dorothea's "childlike" notions and here we have an example in how Dorothea shies away from contemplating any "adult" aspects of marriage which must necessarily deal with sexuality, mothering, domestic arrangements, social commitments and so on. As another form of critique, we raise questions about the efficacy of Casaubon's intellectual project. His enthusiasm for writing the *Key to all Mythologies* is shared by no one else in the family or community. There is no external evidence of past success to build up an assurance of his so-called brilliance, diligence and dedication. In fact, Casaubon's inadequacies are dressed out as honours in the mind of Dorothea. But as readers we can see the dangers in the theoretic constructions of an ideal married life:

> Into this soul hunger as yet all her youthful passion was poured; the union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path (51).

Dorothea's "soul hunger" is contrasted by the vibrant materiality of her sister Celia who enjoys fine clothes, jewels, a good horseride in bracing weather, a gracious day of friendly visits. She takes pleasure in being young and attractive and fun-loving. George Eliot is not critical of such a woman and it would appear that she places Celia's trivial concerns as a useful contrast to Dorothea's sobriety. In a remarkable passage the contrast is enacted in telling detail. Celia brings their mother's jewels so they can be divided between the sisters. Dorothea has, so far, always dismissed with indifference all such requests for a settlement. Once again the casket is opened. Notice Dorothea's vocabulary in the following passage:

> 'How very beautiful the gems are!' said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam. 'It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.'

It is evident that Dorothea is drawn to the jewels but finding such covetousness inappropriate in herself, she quickly justifies her attraction by "merging them in her mystic religious joy" (36). In a passage such as the above, George Eliot is undercutting the image of Dorothea as an 'ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent' person (51).

At this point we should raise a further issue in the text. To what extent is Dorothea aware of the contradictions in herself? In Book One, I suggest that she is naïve about herself and the world of relationships though she honestly projects herself as a woman with a vast store of idealism. Both in the context of her sister and her

husband-to-be, she remains deluded about the gap between her intentions and her abilities. This is a tragic situation as experience will show. The women of a more common nature are able to see through Dorothea's moral blindness. In a colourful phrase Mrs Cadwallader describes Casaubon as a "a great bladder for dried peas to rattle in!" and Celia privately muses about the jewels and thinks " Dorothea is not always consistent"(37).

2.4 THE WORLD BEYOND

The individual stories are a component of larger happenings in *Middlemarch.* Chapter 10 in which Mr. Brooke throws a dinner party is a brilliant device used by George Eliot to integrate the two disparate tales of Dorothea and Lydgate. The section deserves close scrutiny. Notice how the occasion brings an eclectic collection of people from several walks of life, Mr. Bulstrode, Mr. Chichely, Lady Chettam, the Rector, Mr. Standish among others. The imminent marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon is discussed with civilized candour. Ladislaw and Lydgate, who will play a major role in the story, are carefully introduced in the context but held away from the party. Using a range of *Middlemarch* residents to set the tone of the novel, Eliot creates a polyphony of voices representing local concerns and predilections in a small town engaged in social gossip, politics and current news. The author tells us this is the period when debates about the Reform Bills were arousing political consciousness. Mr. Brooke is an emerging leadership figure who is also the guardian of the sisters, Dorothea and Celia. Therefore he functions appropriately as a reference for both the private and public domains. The free flowing conversation at the party, helped considerably by fine wine and victuals, provides wonderful insights into a community and alerts us to the individuals located within it. In some measure, you may be reminded here of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* where the fictional device of a host entertaining pilgrims gives us a wealth of information about various strata in medieval English society.

George Eliot as the omniscient narrator holds similar control over the figures introduced into Mr. Brooke's dinner party. You could pay attention to the opinions expressed by some of the guests about qualities desirable in women and see the standards by which *Middlemarch* wishes to organize domestic priorities. Dorothea is described as an "uncommonly fine woman" but another person says "there should be a little filigree about a woman" and yet another person would like to see " a little devil in a woman"(115). It is obvious that Dorothea is admired and respected at a distance, but people are a trifle wary of her grave demeanour. The author endorses this further in the words: "Sometimes when Dorothea was in company, there seemed to be as complete an air of repose about her as if she had been a picture of Santa Barbara looking out from her tower into the clear air" (114). This is the point at which Eliot interlocks the two stories: the saintly figure gazes beyond the horizon while the mundane concerns of life are discussed at a party.

2.4.1 The Outsider

Of the young people delineated in *Middlemarch,* the man of modern medicine, Tertius Lydgate, is a remarkable creation. The metaphor of the novel's structure – "woven and interwoven," a "web" (Chapter 15, opening paragraph), is brilliantly linked to Lydgate's involvement with the constituents of the human body. As a medical student he has learned that "human bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs and tissues, out of which the various organs—brain, heart, lungs, and so on — are compacted" (177). In the metaphoric "web," of George Eliot, the physiological body and the sociologic l body politic are fused, individuals and social organisms are interdependent.

Lydgate has the trappings of the attractive unknown. As an orphan he has no immediate family by which he can be defined. Aged twenty seven upon his arrival in *Middlemarch*, he has had the benefits of education in the glamorous and fashionable world of Paris which fires the imagination of the people who meet him in a provincial town. The emerging scientific and rational basis of new medicine has given him a sense of challenge and he is eager to practice what he has learned. Lydgate's vision of the betterment of health and his desire to see "reform" in medical systems give him the necessary resolve; a small town offers him an opportunity. That his idealism in thought may not be matched by an idealism in conduct is a caution sounded in the chapter in a famous passage:

> Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which in spite of noble intentions and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgement about furniture, or women, or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons (179).

"Spots of commonness" is a difficult phrase to interpret. Perhaps Eliot is mentioning the fact that Lydgate is vulnerable to emotional claims even if he thinks he is devoted to scientific quest. The material conditions of living are not his everyday occupation but he may fall prey to their attractions. Such a well intentioned person, who also suffers a spot of blindness about himself, can be exploited by manipulative tactics. How this happens to Lydgate is illustrated in a later part of the story.

2.4.2 The Angel of Light

Another of the young figures is Will Ladislaw, painter aesthete, a much disliked cousin of Casaubon, whom Dorothea innocently befriends during her wedding journey in Rome. Chapters 19-21 makes us privy to the growing and dangerous intimacy as Dorothea innocently builds comparisons between her old, scholarly husband and the charming young bohemian: "The first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness, which added to the uncertainty of his changing expression.....Mr. Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless" (241). These views are an articulation of Dorothea's incoherent thoughts. Nevertheless they presage a bonding between a young, neglected wife on her wedding journey and an animated companion who educates her in European art. Justified in Dorothea's mind as a sanctioned friendship with a "cousin," it shows her reliance on intellectual reasoning and her sad neglect of a living knowledge of jealousy, sexuality and such other vital emotions.

Ladislaw has generally been considered by critics as an insubstantial, unconvincing figure, a flaw in a novel of social realism. Contrived situations keep him in the plot. In Book II, he happens to be in Rome when Dorothea and Casaubon are taking their wedding journey. He chances upon Dorothea, musing over her loneliness while wandering in an art gallery. Later in the novel, he is tenuously connected to Mr. Brooke's political ambitions, Rosamond's flirtations, and Bulstrode's secret past. He hangs in there, so to speak, till the time is appropriate for Dorothea's acknowledgement of his love. F.R. Leavis sees Ladislaw as an aspect of Dorothea's immature tendencies, Arnold Kettle calls him "a romantic dream figure — a failure". An endearing man of many nebulous talents, he paints, writes, sings, reads, travels though he lacks any intellectual or moral depths that can match Dorothea's ardour for the upliftment of the poor community. Ladislaw's seductive charm relies substantially on his ability to play with words as is illustrated in this dialogue in Chapter 22:

> "I wonder what your vocation will turn out to be: perhaps you will be a poet? [Dorothea] "That depends. To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern,

> that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition in fits only." [Ladislaw] (255-256).

This nebulous philosophy of a high plane of consciousness may have little ground truth but becomes immensely exciting for a young, idealistic woman waiting to discuss her own ideas constructed upon a fine vision. Denied conversation at home, she falls into an easy companionship with a relative stranger who along with word-making has a gift for laughter at the absurd dimensions of human behaviour.

However, Dorothea's early friendship with Ladislaw in Rome has another aspect too. The wedding journey is a confusing experience for the young bride who struggles with her feelings of passion, desire, devotion, anger, repulsion, weariness while the elderly groom immerses himself in composing research notes on an abstruse subject. As Barbara Hardy has argued, a woman's sexual disappointment could only be alluded to indirectly in Victorian fiction. Chaste, well-bred, heroines could hardly bring themselves to an articulation of their troubles. They could barely understand the symptoms of marital incompatibility. In a spirit of incomprehension, Dorothea sobs uncontrollably (Chapter 21), experiences alternating moods of self-accusation and timid complaint against Casaubon and occasionally seeks distraction in the aesthetic stimulus of art galleries. Her incipient attraction for Will, an obvious contrast to Casaubon, are justifiable in the circumstances. Critics have been unusually harsh upon Ladislaw marking him a "failure" in the scheme of the book, but to Dorothea he appears in a halo of light. Consider the possibility that George Eliot deliberately creates the gap between the reader's expectations from a high-minded Dorothea and Dorothea's own choices in men and diminished action.

2.4.3 A Matter of Money

Of the old people, the banker Mr. Bulstrode, is introduced in some detail in Chapter 16.

> Mr. Bulstrode's power was not due simply to his being a country banker, who knew the financial secrets of most traders in the town and could touch the springs of their credit; it was fortified by a beneficence that was at once ready and severe—ready to confer obligations, and severe in watching the result ....It was a principle with Mr. Bulstrode to gain as much power as possible, that he might use it for the glory of God. He went through a great deal of spiritual conflict and inward argument in order to adjust his motives, and to make clear to himself what God's glory required (184-185).

In reviewing such a summary description of a character, it is time to consider the broader issue of how a character in fiction is presented through at least three kinds of perception — what the person says about the self, what others, individually or collectively, advance as their assessment, and how the author intervenes from a vantage point. These are not mutually exclusive categories, as they often slide into one another, but they are useful analytic tools. About Bulstrode, in the quoted passage, the apparent summary is by George Eliot because no one within the purview of the book can, at this early stage, know of " a principle" of conduct decided upon by Bulstrode. However, the phrase "make clear to himself" reveals Bulstrode self-conscious activity and hints at his dubiousness in the words "adjust his motives." Immediately afterwards (consult your text book) the Middlemarch view of Bulstrode gives another reading that the banker's abstemious habits and worried demeanour are interpreted as genuine concern for the economic well-being of the community. You notice, therefore, that Eliot's writing has a wonderful compressed quality in being able to present differing views even as a character is introduced . Later episodes in

guilt and power hunger. Such attributes are in contrast to Dorothea's openness and "soul hunger." See if you can work out contrasts with other characters too.

2.5 THE AUTHOR IN THE TEXT

The image of a dichotomous world, which is nevertheless linked in unforeseen ways, is strengthened by the next two chapters of Book One. See the long passage which elaborates upon the idea of indeterminacy :

> Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence (122).

According to the critic V.S. Pritchett, " *Middlemarch* is one of the many novels about groups of people in provincial towns. They are differentiated from each other not by class or fortune only, but by their moral history, and this moral differentiation is not casual, it is planned and has its own inner hierarchy."

The first time reader of *Middlemarch* may in fact be distressed by such a shift from a tale of love to a sociological track. Upto Chapter 10, this novel had much in common with Jane Austen's *Emma* and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* in being a woman-centred tale on the subject of matrimony. Now instead of developing the romantic elements, the author leaves the heroine to contemplate her wedding journey. (We are never to be shown the wedding, and might feel "cheated" by the author.) Meanwhile, we are transported to a location where we overhear opinion on local trade and politics from Brooke's guests. Arnold Kettle in fact called it a "clumsy passage" awkwardly bridging two segments of a narrative. Personally I do not agree with this adverse criticism. The transition is smooth and worked out in the context of preliminaries to Dorothea's wedding. Appropriately, Dorothea meets the guests and leaves. The others fall into social small talk which refers to Lydgate, new medicine, new politics and sundry other matters. While the stories are brought into conjunction, the characters are not. But Eliot's philosophical speculation alerts us to the possibility that Dorothea and Lydgate though now socially segregated , may, in the future become inadvertently connected.

Yet another passage of authorial control is closely debated by readers of *Middlemarch*. Examine the following line from Chapter 11 and judge for yourself whether the author's intervention disrupts the text usefully or not: " Destiny stands sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand" (122).According to Arnold Kettle, "it is a pretentious, unhelpful sentence, calling up a significance it does not satisfy. Who, one is tempted to ask, is this Destiny, a character previously unmentioned by the author? And, as a matter of fact, the figure of a sarcastic fate does not preside over *Middlemarch*." To W. J. Harvey, on the other hand, the sentence is a key to understanding the philosophic base of George Eliot. Says he, "She is not invoking a crudely deterministic notion of Fate or Nemesis. Rather she is simply summing up what the novel as a whole evokes: the infinitely complicated shape and motion of the world as we know it to be."

Your own reading could lean towards either of these critical opinions on this important matter of artistic control but you should formulate your individual response and justify it in terms of the text. Notice that each critic here appropriates the mind of the reader by drawing her/him into the assessment. You might be a "resistant reader" and not wish to collude in either opinion.

2.5.1 Many Voices

Towards the end of Book One, the polyphony of voices is resumed as a mode of explication of provincial life. We are introduced to the Vincy family, the Garths, Bulstrode, Lydgate and Peter Featherstone. The class barrier would interfere with their access to the gentry unless the circumstances are special. In developing the romance interest of Rosamond and Lydgate, Eliot creates a social pattern that is an alternative to the life of the elite. Money and status are recurrent themes in nineteenth century British fiction. Here too George Eliot uses the same tools of reference. If wealth is an advantage granted to Dorothea whereby she is left free to pursue her dreams, the shortage of money severely restricts Rosamond's longing for beautiful objects and refined pleasures. She can change the conditions of her birth only through a planned, strategic search for a potentially wealthy partner. Speaking for her thoughts, Eliot says, " A stranger was absolutely necessary for Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own" (145). The net is cast for ensnaring Lydgate, the brilliant outsider who is reputed to have aristocratic relatives. He is the best that Rosamond can find in the vicinity.

2.5.2 A Nod At The Literary Tradition

Book Two is called "Old and Young," the title drawing attention away from individuals to focus anew on a contrasted group. Constituted of many episodes relating to major and minor characters, the chapters offer fine examples of the careful crafting of the novel.

The opening paragraph of Chapter 15 should be carefully examined to demonstrate how Eliot understands her role as a novelist in the literary traditions of English. She pays tribute to "a great historian," Henry Fielding, whose Preface to *Tom Jones* enunciated a theory of "comic epic in prose." As you have studied that novel, you will recall that the picaresque form is adopted for telling Tom's story and his journey along the road is a paradigm for freedom. George Eliot is astute enough to realise that such freewheeling, whether real or narratorial, is available primarily to male characters and male authors. Her own position, among "belated historians" must concentrate on "unravelling certain human lots," a "particular web," and not aim at the "universe."

The feminist critic Elaine Showalter recovers and comments upon a series of British women writers in her book, *A Literature of Their Own,* where the argument is that a female tradition in writing passes from one woman writer to another as a parallel to the male tradition that constitutes the canonical texts in English literature. You may recall that Jane Austen had described her art as a fine painting on "two inches of ivory" implying that she works details into the limited world she depicts in her novels. In the passage in Chapter 15 George Eliot does not mention gender, specifically, as a distinguishing factor but she mentions time. I think gender is implied when she speaks of " the light I can command," for it is a relevant reference to the limited arena of her experience. In another of George Eliot's novels, *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, attention is drawn to a chapter in which "The story pauses a little." The intention is to discuss the nature of her craft wherein she invites a comparison with the Flemish school of painters. She too aims at fidelity to the pictures of ordinary life, she too hopes to draw with sensitivity every fold on the dress and every wrinkle on the face as did Rembrandt and others.

We should however remember that Jane Austen and George Eliot have remained within the mainstream of British writing. Critics ask us to review the standards by which writers gain position in the canon. Here we discover that the token acceptance of two women in the realist tradition condoned by nineteenth century commentators should not obfuscate the fact that several other women writers were relegated to the condemned categories of sentimental or sensational fiction. While privilege was

granted to realism, excess emotion or romanticism were seen as faults in writing. Hence the works of the Bronte sisters and the novelists of the gothic did not get the status they deserved until another kind of literary interpretation saw credibility in the psychological portraits drawn by these writers..

George Eliot's adopting a male pseudonym is to be linked to the expectations of the critics of the time. When *Middlemarch* was published her identity was well known. But she strove to achieve the range considered appropriate in a realist novel in giving details of scientific development, political processes and industrial progress since these were subjects women were not supposed to know about. To that extent, the opening paragraph referring to the origins of the British novel in Fielding's work is a gesture of subversion. She wants us to note that with the passage of time the subject matter of novels has undergone change. Also , I believe she wants us to note that women writers can overcome the limits on "knowledge" that society has placed upon them.

2.5.3 Recalling Plato

So far in our analysis of *Middlemarch* we have placed an emphasis upon co-relations of plot, character, authorial control, which are aspects of traditional literary criticism. Modifying tradition to an extent, David Lodge adapts Plato's terms *mimesis* and *diegesis* to the novel. In Lodge's summary, " Mimesis, then, is narrating by imitating another's speech. Diegesis is narrating in one's own voice." Strictly speaking only drama would be diegetic. A novel which combines direct speech and also reportage or authorial commentary, uses mimesis as well as diegesis. About issues relating to *Middlemarch*, Lodge says:

> There is no *necessary* connection between mimesis and realism: some novels that consist largely of dialogue ... are highly artificial; and some of the most realistic (i.e.convincing, lifelike, compelling), passages in *Middlemarch* are diegetic (for example the account of Lydgate's unpremeditated declaration to Rosamond in Chapter 31). But it is true that mimesis is inherently better adapted to realistic effect than diegesis, simply because it uses words to imitate words. The classic realist novel of the nineteenth century maintained a fairly even balance between mimesis and diegesis, showing and telling, scene and summary, and it did so at the expense of some degree of realistic illusion, in the interests of ethical control of the story and the reader's response.

Middlemarch uses dialogue and description in order to build up the story. Sometimes there is the author's account of an interior monologue revealing thoughts unknown to the dramatis personae. Likewise, modes of description can further the content of dramatic dialogue or contradict it.. Lodge makes a good point about the intersection of two important methods of explication. But there are other intermediate ones too, as you might discover.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you have been introduced to the main characters in the novel and gained a close look at the literary devices used by George Eliot to bring coherence and connectedness to her plot . You will also have realised that Eliot is working with a larger canvas of reference than any woman writer before her in England. She is acutely conscious of her responsibility as a historian of society, a society in which women play a significant role, and she tries, often enough, to draw the reader's attention to the verisimilitude with which life in a provincial town has been presented.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Describe the reasons for Dorothea's attraction to Casaubon.

2. How does George Eliot perceive her role as a historian of society?

3. What are the main issues being discussed in the town of *Middlemarch*?

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel*, 1959.
W. J. Harvey, "Introduction" to *Middlemarch*, 1966
Laurence Lerner, *The Truthtellers: Jane Austen, George Eliot and D.H. Lawrence*, 1967.
David Lodge, "Middlemarch and the Idea of the Classic Realist Text," in Arnold Kettle ed., *The Nineteenth Century Novel: Critical Essays and Documents*, 1981.

UNIT 3 PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 In the Lengthening Shadow

3.1.1 Waiting and Watching

3.1.2 A Hidden Subject

3.1.3 A Rattle in the Throat

3.2. The Springs of Love

3.2.1 Youth and Maid

3.2.2 A Sudden Proposal

3.2.3 A Love that has no Name

3.4 The Author and the Reader

3.5 Philosophical Influences

3.5.1 Three Gentlemen Thinkers and a Lady

3.6 Let Us Sum Up

3.7 Questions

3.8 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This section helps you to critically examine the transitions made in the novel from the subject of youthful idealism to the disillusionment induced by experience. As personal relationships get mired in societal expectations, freedom seems an illusory, impossible dream. Controlling apparatus curbs the flights of the imagination. The philosophical base of George Eliot's novel is explained with reference to the thinkers who influenced her writing.

3.1 IN THE LENGTHENING SHADOW

"Waiting for Death" is a rather morbid pastime but in the important section with that title, several changes are recorded in the dynamics of social and personal attachments among the "old and young" people previously considered. Specifically, the concern is with Casaubon, Dorothea and Peter Featherstone. The subject of grave illness, poignant in itself, is enhanced by the motif of watching and waiting; a strenuous poise recording a variety of feelings. In the words of Barbara Hardy, " We observe frustration, fear, anxiety, understanding, insensitivity, love, sympathy, and professional detachment blended with that good humane curiosity informed by imagination."

Let us now take a closer look at Casaubon who had been dismissed as "a great bladder for dried peas to rattle in " (82) in the early chapters of *Middlemarch.* An aged, dedicated scholar, determined to write his magnum opus, a *Key to All Mythologies,* he spent a lifetime of labour in researching the material to be shaped into final form. In a way, this is yet another metaphor for control by which the human will attempts to give direction to life's inchoate forms. Dorothea was to be an agency for his self-expression but Casaubon had misjudged his compatibility with Dorothea just as she had. Even during their early association in Rome, he had developed an uncomfortable feeling of being spied upon and being suspected of pursuing a fruitless endeavour. He was irritated by her proximity yet jealous of her absence.

At Lowick, their home in Middlemarch, tensions surface yet again over the arrival of Will Ladislaw. So far in the novel, the reader's sympathy had been directed to Dorothea and her sweet, innocent dependence upon Will. Now, changing track, Eliot, surprisingly, springs the question whether a man such as Casaubon is not deserving of our pity.

> For my part I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self—never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of thought, the ardour of passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted (314).

The psychological realism of such a passage goes a long way in our appreciation of George Eliot's integrity as a writer who is fairly impartial to her characters and who invites the reader to enter the emerging dynamics of altering relations in her story. Casaubon's trepidation about the efficacy of his "Key" fits well with the theme of vocation so important in *Middlemarch.* Like Lydgate and Dorothea dreaming of a better world inspired by their act of community service, Casaubon too dreams of the completion of a document which will stream brilliantly into the academic firmament. Eliot would have us notice one critical difference. The doctor and the social worker desire improvement in the lives of others, the egotistical scholar covets fame for himself.

3.1.1 Watching and Waiting

Following this section of *Middlemarch,* our sympathy is directed to Casaubon's failing health and a heart attack which occurs soon after an agitated scene with Dorothea. As Lydgate is called in to attend to the patient, the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate become seamlessly attached. Chapter 30, which Barbara Hardy examines in great detail, is a concentrated enquiry into the thoughts of Casaubon, Dorothea and Lydgate, such as would have satisfied the fastidious Henry James's demands for selection and concentration in a novel. Lydgate watches Dorothea watching her own feelings towards an old ailing husband. "Tell me what I can do ?"(323) she pleads with the doctor. It is a "cry from the soul," a "sob in voice" (324). Casaubon is to be guarded "against mental agitation"; she must try "to moderate and vary his occupations" (323), she is advised.

Thereafter follows another remarkable passage of self-reflection for Dorothea — memory, guilt, fear, repressed hostility, helplessness, resolve, and a multitude of related emotions battle for primacy in her review of her marriage with Casaubon. For a woman who had elevated "duty" above all feelings the choice is self-evident. In Barbara Hardy's words:

> Dorothea does not consciously weigh and choose, as on some occasions before and after, but here spontaneously chooses love. She has stopped

resenting, wanting, and criticising, and she thinks of herself in relation to Casaubon only as a possible and frail source of help. She has broken with the past Dorothea who has usually spoken and acted from a sense of her own trials, has stopped listening to her own heartbeats and thinks only of the feeble ones of her husband.

Valuable as this insight is from Hardy, consider for yourself whether this reading is the only possible one. For instance, where Hardy claims that Dorothea chooses love, I would say she chooses duty. Also, Dorothea may quell her criticism of Casaubon's wasteful intellectual effort but she cannot be blind to the futility of his work. The difference is in the expressiveness of her attitudes about which Hardy is correct. But I would add the corollary that Dorothea represses her negative sentiments about Casaubon so that she may attend to his illness but her agitation is ample evidence that the resentments may surface later.

Casaubon too must wait and watch, his frail body now an alibi for the failure of his literary production. "To Casaubon now, it was as if he suddenly found himself on the dark river-brink and heard the plash of the oncoming oar, not discerning the forms, but expecting the summons" (462). At this point, George Eliot withdraws our sympathy from Casaubon by showing him unyielding and mean towards his devoted wife. Psychologists today would call the behaviour a "withdrawal" for it rejects all offers of help. Dorothea's desire to give primacy to her husband's needs is met with a cold, mean reticence on Casaubon's part. Her timid advances are returned by his chill, her solicitations negated by his silence. The deterioration in the relationship is given in Chapter 42. The anxious query that Dorothea had made to Lydgate earlier about what she could *do*, has now turned to a helpless bewilderment spoken to herself, "What have I done — what am I — that he should treat me so?" (463)

Her innocence which does not permit her to see Ladislaw's attentions is a strong cause of Casaubon's rudeness. The contrast is highlighted once again. The men are so different — old and young, gloomy and cheerful, wealthy and genteel poor, scholar and dilettante, reserved and effervescent, static and itinerant, staid and bohemian. As egotism is another important theme in the novel, we see Casaubon living by it whereas Will has no sense of it. Most irksome to Casaubon is his own suspicion of his intellectual prowess, a dreadful secret which he can hardly admit even to himself. Its a haunting possibility of failure which he would not want anyone to pry into. Dorothea's proximity to him and his work make her the one likely betrayer of his dreams, the destroyer of the foundation of his posture as serious scholar. He seems to guess at the extent of her knowledge of such a secret and to wonder about her loyalty to him.

3.1.2 A Hidden Subject

A further subject is hinted at but not mentioned explicitly. The Victorian taboo on discussing sexuality keeps the subject in abeyance. But astute readers would be alert to the nuances of the unhappy wedding journey and the ensuing irritability between husband and wife. Also the attraction between Will and Dorothea has a sexual aspect though not admitted in the surface text of the novel. The dry intellection of Casaubon and his distaste for any kind of bodily touch is mentioned in the book. Will, on the other hand speaks of body, colour, taste, sound, albeit in the context of art, but such depersonalisation of implicit sexuality is within the permissible sphere of Victorian writing. Feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the ground-breaking study, *Madwoman in the Attic*, demonstrated that women writers had to resort to indirection to speak of unmentionable subjects such as female sexuality, and that madness, for instance, was a meta-language for unfulfilled desire in women. Dorothea's dismay at Casaubon's coldness does not result in madness of course. She is one of the sanest heroines in British fiction. Yet, when you recall that Virginia Woolf said *Middlemarch* was a novel for "grown-up people," you will understand that

she was alluding to a latent sexuality playing upon the contentious positions given to Casaubon, Dorothea and Ladislaw.

3.1.3 A Rattle in the Throat

The other figure of death is Peter Featherstone, whose avariciousness is a form of control. It parallels Casaubon's invocations of "duty." The deathbed scene in Chapter 33, which has Mary Garth attending upon the dying and imperious Featherstone, is remarkable as a study in contrasted character. The angry, helpless, immobilised Featherstone rattles his keys and tries to bribe Mary into altering his will. Mary refuses. She will not sell her conscience for money even though she is poor and her act of compliance would have helped Fred Vincy whom she loves.

3.2 THE SPRINGS OF LOVE

The situation *Three Love Problems*, is created by the deaths of Casaubon and Featherstone, both controlling men who reach beyond death through the legal injunctions laid down in their wills. Eliot shows, on one hand, the importance of money and, on the other, the capability of some noble minds to transcend the lure of material gains. Also, Eliot's metaphor for the novel's structure — web, node, tissue — give credence to a belief in organicism. Individuals are said to be inextricably connected by their community based transactions and further linked to a larger universe of Nature and its incomprehensible "grand design." In the particular instance of this section in *Middlemarch* there may be no apparent contact between Casaubon and Peter Featherstone, but the terms of their will link them thematically. Similarly the theme of "love," variously interpreted and enacted, links three disparate stories in Book Four of *Middlemarch*.

3.2.1 Youth and Maid

The critic Henry James liked the episodes concerning Fred Vincy and Mary Garth the least:

> The love problem as the author calls it, of Mary Garth, is placed on a higher level than the reader willingly grants it. To the end we care less about Fred Vincy than appears to be expected of us. In so far as the author's design has been to reproduce the total sum of life in an English village forty years ago, this commonplace young gentleman, with his somewhat meagre tribulations and his rather neutral egotism, has his proper place in the picture; but the author narrates his fortunes with a fullness of detail which the reader often finds irritating.

I am not averse to such an opinion though it may seem prudish to castigate a rakish young man for his excesses in clothing and riding. Mary Garth deserved better but love, as they say, is blind. Finally she accepts the truth about Fred and responds to the affections of a far better, more sober man, Mr. Farebrother.

The Garth family suggests a kind of referential "moral centre" (David Daiches's term) in a novel about transitions. Domestic scenes such as the one in which Mrs. Garth cooks while testing her children in grammar and history speaks of a family holding together in shared values of interdependence. Self-centredness has no room here as we observe in the details about Mary's integrity at the cost of her personal happiness. She could have used tools of manipulation to win Fred through playing upon the sentiments of Peter Featherstone but she remains honest to her high ideals of conduct. As Mary belongs to the lower rungs of society George Eliot is telling us that integrity and idealism can be personal attributes separate from class. This is an important aspect of the novel because it challenges hierarchies of a stratified social

structure in which the elite are often given the privilege of moral authority. Mary and Dorothea have much in common as you might notice.

3.2.2 A sudden proposal

Lydgate's romantic attachment is initiated and controlled by Rosamond who had set her sights upon him fairly early in the narrative. A close look at Chapter 31 reveals a sample of the brilliant visual and dramatic details that are so much a part of George Eliot's art. In reading the passage for the fine nuances of emotion, recall that Lydgate has hurried into the room and hopes to leave a message with Rosamond for her father. Rosamond, engrossed in the womanly pastime of fine embroidery, is deeply hurt by his abrupt manner. Either by accident or design, we are never sure which, she drops her needlework and both Lydgate and Rosamond stoop to pick it up.

> When he rose , he was very near to a lovely little face set on a fair long neck which he had been used to see turning about under the most perfect management of self-contented grace. But as he raised his eyebrows now he saw a certain helplessness quivering which touched him quite newly, and made him look at Rosamond with a questioning flash. At this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old: she felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else than let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would. That moment of naturalness was the crystallizing feather-touch: it shook flirtation into love (335).

George Eliot leaves in doubt the meaning of "naturalness" in this episode for Rosamond may well be, paradoxically, practicing being "natural" with the intuitive sense that such behaviour will appeal to a candid man such as Lydgate. Whether deliberate or as an aspect of Rosamond's usual posturing, this appearance of innocent helplessness wins the doctor's heart. The tears and agitation foreshorten a friendship into a betrothal.

Feminist criticism might see this as an example of male gaze upon the female subject. The proposal scene is a recurrent trope in nineteenth century fiction and it is enacted in various forms. Remember Lord Warburton in *The Portrait of a Lady* gazing upon Isabel in the picture gallery, "herself a portrait.," before he ardently expresses his matrimonial intention. The woman in such a framework picturises a vulnerability which evokes strong desires in the male to protect the weak. The origins of such a relation are in the chivalric code which, in English literature, Chaucer set out in *The Knight's Tale.* Considering that social relations are best examined in their historical context, the ideal of man as the protector of a woman "victim" is transposed through time. In the nineteenth century novel there are examples of how this formula is turned around by guileful women who will play-act to suit the patriarchal "model." You could think of Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* or Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* as examples. Feminist critics would say that the male gaze is an act of appropriation. Undoubtedly, the beautiful Rosamond is closely observed by Lydgate. But this is to Rosamond's advantage as by a coy pretence of helplessness, she precipitates a situation favourable to herself.

In contrast to the moral stability of the Garth family, the Vincys are shown to be people who will ride upon opportunities to improve their material and social standing. The appearance of wealth and class is more important than intrinsic worth. George Eliot's criticism of such social climbers is implicit but we notice that the satire is gentle. She takes into account the historical processes wherein "new money" has been generated by the policies of reform. Ambitious women and men from this class have to negotiate social prejudice in order to carve a respectable place for themselves. For the women, the "right" marriage was the only way to an acquisition of status.

3.2.3 A Love That Has No Name

The third love problem concerns Ladislaw, who is described by Middlemarchers in colourful epithets: "loose fish" (392) "a kind of Shelley" (394) "a Byronic hero — an amorous conspirator " (415). Chapter 37 lets us overhear an intimate conversation between Dorothea and Will in which he reveals his complicated parentage — Polish and English — and the "rebellious blood" that he has inherited. Casaubon's financial settlement for Will is said to be no more than the mandate of family obligation. Will's impetuous language and behaviour (an expression of his rebellious blood) is countered by Dorothea's sobriety as she explains the reasons for Casaubon's dislike —she prefers to use the euphemism, "painful feelings" — of Ladislaw.

Their attachment is forbidden explicitly by Casaubon and implicitly by society because Dorothea is a married woman. However, her status in social hierarchy and her intellectual ability to participate in the emerging political debates provide space for her to entertain Ladislaw at a quasi-personal level. He is, for instance, being considered for an editorial job to monitor Mr. Brooke's political pamphlets. That Ladislaw's acceptance of the offer depends upon Dorothea's encouragement is evident in their conversation. The pair in this scene offer a contrast to Lydgate and Rosamond for here the articulation of their mutual interest can only be denoted in silence. Yet a few words hint at a depth of feelings. A pact is made, the strength of which is unknown to both the signatories. See this passage:

> "I should like you to stay very much," said Dorothea, at once, as simply and readily as she had spoken in Rome. There was not the shadow of a reason in her mind at the moment why she should not say so.
>
> "Then I *will* stay," said Ladislaw, shaking his head backward, rising and going towards the window, as if to see whether the rain had ceased.(403)

Will and Dorothea's blossoming relationship thrives upon the soil of reformist doctrine provided by Mr. Brooke. The forbidden dimensions are never expressed but Will feels an electric shock, "a tingling at his finger ends," on Dorothea's arrival. She confides in him her greatest desires and dreams "for the improvement of the people" (424).

A woman with reformist zeal, Dorothea's idealism is still strong but we witness her helplessness as she lacks the means to effect change directly and must depend upon the advocacy of the men in her life, so far Mr. Brooke, Mr. Chattam and Mr. Casaubon, and now Mr. Ladislaw. Will has little political agency—he stays for the sake of Dorothea — but he has eloquent rhetoric which has a seductive appeal for Dorothea's theoretic mind. In a famous passage, she speaks of her "belief ":

> "That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower." (427)

In answer to Dorothea's query about his own "religion," Will says, "To love what is good and beautiful when I see it...." (427) Consider for yourself whether "reform" can be built upon such nebulous principles? Is George Eliot indulging the abstractions of her heroine or asking us to critique such notions?

Casaubon's awareness of his wife's attachment for Ladislaw causes more than just jealousy. His summary of her tendency is fairly accurate: "She is ready prey to any man who knows how to play adroitly either on her affectionate ardour or her Quixotic enthusiasm"(458). Are women subjected to dependency under the terms of patriarchy? How are we to distinguish between Casaubon's gestures of protection

and his gestures of control? Is Will Ladislaw an opportunist seeking Dorothea's affection for a more dubious purpose? You are urged to contemplate these issues.

3.4 THE AUTHOR AND HER READERS

We are now beyond the middle of George Eliot's text and should be aware that she strives to present balances, do "justice" to her characters by entering the motivations that energize their actions. But she has her partialities too, and often, the story pauses a little while Eliot places solemn philosophical propositions for our consideration. The individual author implicates the reader in a common assumption that the "we" in the text constitutes a shared viewpoint. Thereby strands of belief that are contrary to the authors get negated, or at least, obscured.

Note the following examples:

- Perhaps that was a more cheerful time for observers and theorizers than the present: we are apt to think it the finest era of the world when America was beginning to be discovered.... (176).

- We are all imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire: and poor old Featherstone, who laughed much at the way in which others cajoled themselves, did not escape the fellowship of illusion (358).

- If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity (226).

George Eliot has often enough been called a "moralist," which to my mind, is an extreme statement. In the passages cited above, and in several others that are interspersed in the narrative, she wishes to engage the reader in a discussion on the general condition of humankind based upon the vicissitudes of her particular, imaginary people. The pronouncements are often philosophical projections.

3.5 PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES

One must note here that George Eliot was deeply influenced by intellectual theories of her time, specially those connected with "determinism." Briefly explained here are the basic assumptions:

- The affairs of the world are "determined" therefore not much scope exists for human responsibility

- Despite the overall determinism, equations of cause and effect operate in matters of human choice. To some extent, therefore an individual is "free" and responsible for action.

- Determinism, though a philosophic theory, is manifest in the daily routines and "destinies" of people.

- Human will is a potent force that informs conduct. While it cannot alter a deterministic universe, it directs moral behaviour relating to duty, obligation, responsibility.

- Since individual will is related to the "determined" path of mankind, a complex "web" reacts to exercises of power/action at any point. The structure of society is organic where every part is necessary for the action of the whole.

- Egotism isolates individuals, while relatedness to society brings spiritual upliftment.

- The universe is governed by principles of fundamental equality. Differences are culturally or locally precipitated. Ordinary and heroic lives are a matter of "perception" not a "given" condition of a deterministic universe. Therefore, changes in status are very likely.

- Flux and fluidity compose ordinary lives within a rigid, fixed universe. Historical processes are dynamic.

The main tenets of determination are given above to help you understand why George Eliot often "explains" her text to the hypothetical reader. She prophecies, warns, justifies, rationalises the thoughts and actions of several people as though taking the reader in confidence.

3.5.1 Three Gentlemen Thinkers And A Lady

George Eliot's ideas derived from three major thinkers about whom you should know:

- **Auguste Comte** (1798-1857) was a French philosopher and moralist who, in 1838, first used the term "sociology." Known as the founder of Positivism, he conceived a method of study based on observation and restricted to the observable. Comte's main contribution was the idea that a time had come when it was possible to live fully in the world of science. He claimed that the goal of science is prediction, to be accomplished using laws of succession. Explanation insofar as attainable has the same structure as prediction. Historical processes were dynamic and progressive. Society was to be visualised scientifically as organic where every part is necessary to the healthy action of the whole.

- **Charles Darwin** (1809-1882) is the author of the controversial book, *The Origin of Species* (1859) which challenged many suppositions of the Bible. It argued that species change and adapt according to the environment. Entire species may become extinct if the environment alters enough to make them ill equipped for survival. A species constantly evolves in favour of the fittest members. The evolutionary world was predatory and potentially violent in its struggle for survival. Along with environment, heredity was an important factor in the theory of evolution. The organisms that happen to possess the characteristics necessary to survive and reproduce, proliferate. Darwin's theories, based on scientific observation, indirectly questioned the notion of a benevolent and arbitrary God.

- **Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach** (1804-1872) was a German materialist philosopher and critic of religion. His seminal work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1854) was translated by George Eliot and she was deeply influenced by its questioning of dogma. Feuerbach sought to demystify both faith and reason in favour of the concrete and situated existence of human consciousness. He stated that religion was a human construction and there was need to take back what had been believed to be divine directives. Since religion itself proves to be merely a "dream of the human mind," metaphysics, theology, and religion can be reduced to "anthropology," the study of concrete embodied human consciousness and its cultural products.

In terms of the application of these theories to *Middlemarch*, you will notice that many of the ideas permeate the text. The driving emphasis is on verifiability of human experience grounded on cognitive, scientifically observed data. For George Eliot, the religion of humanity mattered more that any other form of devoutness. Hence her partiality towards Dorothea. At the same time she understands the world as

who must adapt to her environment in order to survive. Will Ladislaw is conditioned, in many ways, by his inherited "blood" and Bulstrode must work out his fate as the consequence of his earlier misdeeds. There is a causality to be emphasised even as "destiny" stands sarcastically aside.

See if you find other examples in the text.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In reading this Unit you should have paid attention to the philosophical premises on which George Eliot based her story of a provincial town. Determinism gave significance to human endeavour even as it believed that people were conditioned by the circumstances particular to them. The argument is worked into major developments in the story pertaining to the love motif, which now has acquired a sombre tone.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. In reviewing Casaubon's behaviour towards Dorothea, do you regard him with sympathy or anger? Give reasons for your answer.

2. Write a note on the main tenets of Determinism and show how the philosophy explains the personality of Lydgate or Rosamond.

3. How do you account for the contradiction in Mary Garth, that she should be so mature in her dealings with Peter Featherstone yet so impetuous in her love for Fred who least deserves her?

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

David Daiches, "*Middlemarch.*" An Introduction to the novel in the "Studies in English Literature" series, 1963
Mary Jacobus, *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, 1979
Jerome H. Buckley ed., *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, 1975
T.R. Wright, *Middlemarch*, 1990

UNIT 4 ELIOT'S PERSPECTIVES

Structure

4.0 Objectives

4.1 Conflicts in Ideology

4.2 The Community as Moral Voice

4.3 George Eliot and the "Woman Question"

4.4 Using the Gothic

4.5 A Critical Change

4.6 Let Us Sum Up

4.7 Questions

4.8 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This section begins with a discussion of "ideology" in *Middlemarch* based on an important critical statement made by Terry Eagleton. The author's position within the conflicting social structures of her time can inform several details of the text. This Unit encourages you to examine the debates on "corporate" and "individualist ideologies", George Eliot's own ambiguous relation to the "Woman Question", and Eliot's creative play with older literary forms such as the "gothic" even as she attempts a "social-realist" narrative. Although the main textual references are to Books 5 and 6, you will notice the numerous thematic connections with much that has happened earlier.

4.1 CONFLICTS IN IDEOLOGY

George Eliot's preference for "determinism" as an active philosophy for understanding developments in the cognitive world creates several difficulties in our reading of *Middlemarch*. One of them is with "ideology" which is a term liable to many definitions but which is best interpreted in the words of the French philosopher, Althusser: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence." Terry Eagleton, in a famous essay, " George Eliot: Ideology and Literary Form" draws attention to the contradictions inherent in the form of *Middlemarch*:

> The ideological matrix of George Eliot's fiction is set in the increasingly corporate character of Victorian capitalism and its political apparatus. Eliot's work attempts to resolve a structural conflict between two forms of mid-Victorian ideology: between progressively muted Romantic individualism, concerned with the untramelled evolution of the 'free spirit,' and certain 'higher,' corporate ideological modes. These higher modes (essentially Feuerbachian humanism and scientific rationalism) seek to identify the immutable social laws to which Romantic individualism, if it is to avoid both ethical anarchy and social disruption, must conform.

The conflict between corporate law and individual impetus can be illustrated with reference to the last contact Dorothea has with Casaubon. Please refer to Book Five. The title, "The Dead Hand," has ominous suggestions of eerie, disembodied guidance from a world beyond. Something powerful is determining earthly existence. Casaubon's death is reported in Chapter 48, the details are held out of sight, as Eliot had kept away from the reader other scenes of potential sentimentalisation, for instance, Dorothea's marriage and early days with her husband, Lydgate's words of proposal to Rosamond. But Eliot is marvelous, once again, in probing the psychological depths within a character.

Dorothea is struggling to resolve two questions just before she learns of Casaubon's death. One posed by her husband is asking for her unconditional, blind surrender to his will, whatever that may be. The other is a self questioning whether she can any longer, believe and trust in "The Key" and its author that she had considered her duty in marriage. (519) "She simply felt that she was going to say "Yes" to her own doom (522) but she never says it. Casaubon is found dead in the garden.

In principle, the romantic individualism of Dorothea tries to exercise a choice in preserving some independent space for herself, knowing as she does the harsh appropriating nature of Casaubon. The romantic is in conflictual relation with "the immutable social laws" (Eagteton's phrase) of mid-Victorian ideology. An over expression of free spirit will cause ethical imbalance and social disharmony — tear the fabric of society upon which the 'laws' of institutions such as marriage are grounded.

The institution gives authority to the husband. Casaubon's will contains a dreadful codicil that casts an ugly shadow upon Dorothea's friendship with Ladislaw. A personal matter is subjected to open scrutiny, an individual joy and innocence turns into public humiliation. The conflict between 'duty' and freedom finds expression in one of the finest passages in *Middlemarch* in Chapter 50, beginning, "Her world was in a state of convulsive change...."

Terry Eagleton's criticism of George Eliot is that "a potentially tragic collision between 'corporate' and 'individualist' ideologies is consistently diffused and repressed by the forms of Eliot's fiction." By form, he means the classic realist and the historical, for which traditional critics had praised *Middlemarch.* Eagleton, in fact finds "an historical vacuum". What is offered instead, he says, is "an ambivalent, indeterminate era leading eventually to the 'growing good of the world'."

Examine for yourself if Eagleton's views are tenable by reading critically into the problematics of the text. Undoubtedly, there is a discrepancy between the professed ideology and the manifest expression of romantic individualism in several, key characters. Take Dorothea and Lydgate for examples. But is this gap to be seen as a 'fault' of the text? My own feeling is that Eliot has a firm intellectual grasp of the contradictions inherent in a society in transition. The realism of *Middlemarch* is not because it is a slice of history but because psychological realism, as depicted in the fictional world of *Middlemarch,* exists within and beyond time.

As to resolutions that are artificially juxtaposed to the so called "real" base, a case has often been made against Will Ladislaw. When the codicil is made public, there is a general embarrassment. Neither Celia nor Sir James, not even Dorothea herself imagines that the forbidden marriage will take place. But it does. And Ladislaw, we may recall, is a romantic individualist who does *not* subscribe to the "higher corporate ideological modes" of Victorian society. Can we not grant that George Eliot is critiquing society by bringing a highly refined analysis to the obvious dichotomy of self and society? She is not trapped in any ideological confusion herself although several anomalies of the time are presented in the text.

Such an argument is developed further in D.A. Miller's essay, "George Eliot: The Wisdom of Balancing Claims." His thesis is given below:

> The main force of the pluralism in *Middlemarch*, however, is to make us aware of perspective itself. What traditional form shows us is no longer exhibited in a spirit of naïve realism, as simply what is there to be seen. Instead it must now be taken as a function of a perceiving system with its own desire, disguises, deletions, and disinterests, *which might have been organised otherwise.*

Critical perspectives can read the same text differently as you notice. For Miller, the balances that George Eliot strives for are a mark of her authorial maturity and wisdom. Attitudes demonstrated by main characters in the novel are subjected to an internal review through other, community-based observations. One may even be reminded of Bakhtin's theory of polyphony wherein a multiplicity of voices is said to undercut any dominant discourse. There is much in a novel which is beyond the purview of direct narration. Through obliquity, that which is left unsaid or unseen, intersects the events of the dramatic plot. According to Miller, the voice of the community constructs its own narrative balancing the excesses of individual imagination. However, according to Terry Eagleton, there is no such balancing of competing viewpoints, only unresolved ideological tensions.

4.2 THE COMMUNITY AS MORAL VOICE

There is considerable credit in listening to the many voices in *Middlemarch* although the author's remains dominant and her continuous emphasis is Dorothea. Miller speaks of a "narrative" of the community. Indeed there is a chorus of characters populating the scene around the central events — all interrelated by fine ramifications of the plot. Even an early critic, V.S. Pritchett, had described the complex chart:

> *Middlemarch* is the first of many novels about groups of people in provincial towns. They are differentiated from each other not by class or fortune only, but by their moral history, and this moral history is not casual, it is planned and has its own inner hierarchy. Look at the groups. Dorothea, Casaubon and Ladislaw seek to enter the highest spiritual fields....The pharisaical Bulstrode, the banker, expects to rise both spiritually and financially at once....The Garths, being country people and outside this urban world, believe simply in the virtue of work as a natural law...We may not accept George Eliot's standards, but we can see that they are not conventional, and that they do not make her one-sided. She is most intimately sympathetic to human beings and is never sloppy about them.

The comparisons and contrasts are numerous but let us here reflect upon the Fred-Mary Garth- Farebrother triangle as a parallel to Casaubon-Dorothea-Ladislaw. True that Fred prefers "irresponsible style" to responsible decision making; and to an extent the blame is placed on the new wealth and social aspirations of the trading community. But Eliot in the persons of Farebrother, Mary's silent suitor, and Caleb Garth, her father, gives marvellous portraits of work ethics honoured at the time as a mark of sobriety. Caleb Garth tells Fred most lucidly: " You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not always look over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin. And the other is that you must not be ashamed of your work, and think it would be more honourable to do something else" (606). Mary has been brought up on these principles and seeing her affection for Fred, Caleb tries to correct certain attitudes in the profligate young man.

Mary is attracted to Fred whereas Farebrother is far better suited to her temperament. A well-intentioned, well-bred man, Farebrother tends to be rather conventional but

has a lucky chance in his vocation when he gets an appointment at Lowick after the death of Casaubon. Duty is foremost in his mind. We are told:

> The gladness in his face was that of an active kind which seems to have energy enough not only to flash outwardly, but to light up busy vision within: one seemed to see thoughts, as well as delight, in the glances(553).

Decency and uprightness is the hallmark of this gentleman. Suppressing his own attraction for Mary, he promises to advocate Fred's case with her (539). The conversation with Mary at the end of Chapter 52 is modulated to show that restraint, decorum, and ethics are not exclusive to people defined by their class, education or material condition. Honesty marks the words of both with reference to their feelings towards Fred (560-561).

Examine the following statement by Farebrother noting the balances in thought and sentiment.

> I understand that you resist any attempt to fetter you, but either your feeling for Fred Vincy excludes your entertaining another attachment, or it does not: either he may count on you remaining single until he shall have earned your hand, or he may in any case be disappointed." (561)

Mr. Farebrother is the product of a simple code in education, yet, gifted with insight into difficult human emotions of possessiveness, insecurity, jealousy. In the above passage, Farebrother speaks for Fred but, indirectly, presents his own feelings towards Mary. In a way his is a prohibited love because Mary seems betrothed to Fred. How does Farebrother's language compare with that of Dorothea's public speeches where, if you remember, she always presents a balance of ideas. Even in private she withholds any excessive display of emotion. Also, you may note that Dorothea's affection for Ladislaw is forbidden any expression, yet she conveys her need for his presence without upsetting the decorum of society—that is, until the codicil puts an evil complexion upon their innocent attachment.

The point of the exercise is to show you parallel structures in the groups who are socially separated. While George Eliot is realistic enough to accept the hierarchies in society, her subversive authorship makes moral standards more important than social placement.

4.3 GEORGE ELIOT AND THE "WOMAN QUESTION"

Dorothea's inner growth, from innocence to experience, is reflected in several chapters of the section called "The Widow and The Wife." In a poignant review of her high idealism which has met with severe impediments, she says:

> I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given up (589).

Dorothea's many disappointments have left her feeling powerless, ineffectual. Does this condition relate *Middlemarch* to the "woman question" and its early history in the nineteenth century?

Kate Millett, the author of *Sexual Politics* (1970) came up with the charge that George Eliot had lived the feminist revolution but had not written about it. In 1976, an article by Zelda Austen, "Why feminist critics are angry with George Eliot, " traced the hostility of critics such as Millett to the novelist's "failure to allow her heroines any happy fulfillment other than marriage." The freedom and fame that Eliot had achieved in life was not, apparently, transmitted to the fictional world.

Examine such criticism with care by paying attention to the historical setting in the novel. Remember that there are "the unwritten years in *Middlemarch* "as Gillian Beer calls them, "the years between the setting and the composition." which we can date as 1830 to 1870. Two interesting processes were happening at the time (i) the feminist awareness (ii) The passage of the Reform Bill. It is true that Eliot lived through the feminist revolution but the episodes in the novel predate many of the significant events. So one should grant that she was writing with the confident knowledge of the positive directions that the women's movement was to take but, she could not, in fairness, attribute the "achievements" to a prior time-frame. It is also true that she had taken the bold and "irregular" step in her own life to live openly with Mr. George Lewes but one should concede that she saw this as an *individual* decision and no part of the potential agenda to be addressed by the "Woman Question."

The negotiation with history that we have here may remind you of Nathaniel Hawthorne's artistry in framing the novel , *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne's story is set among the Puritans in Boston in the mid-seventeenth century. Hawthorne as an heir and critic of the Puritans, writes the novel two hundred years later when several women have successfully challenged the traditions of society. *The Scarlet Letter* constantly plays with time. On one hand, it is the portrayal of Hester's "submission" to the law of the land, on the other hand, is her vision of a better future for women. The novelist is aware that Hester's vision will be substantially endorsed but in the novel, Hester functions within the constraints of immediate history.

Time in *Middlemarch* is collapsed to a much lesser degree. But the years were critical in the development of the women's movement. The general sequence is given below:

- According to Gillian Beer, "In the 1840s the emphasis in England was on realising fully the special moral influence of woman." The home is given considerable importance as the value systems of society are expected to be introduced, nurtured and strengthened by the wife, the mother, the "lady of the house." The dichotomy between the home and the world, private and public, breaks down since the prevalence of individual virtue or vice effects both segments.

- The main event in the 1850s was The Married Women's Property Bill. George Eliot signed a petition in favour of it. The point emphasised was "that in entering the state of marriage, they no longer pass from freedom into the condition of a slave". *The English Women's Journal* discussed issues relating to the Bill by looking further into the problems of divorce, child custody, inheritance and other aspects of family law.

- The 1860s saw an emphasis on the education of women. Though theoretically educational programmes for women were designed to introduce them to "the world of ideas," in practice women received "superficial instruction."(*The Alexander Magazine*, March, 1865. Quoted by Gillian Beer). In the early pages of *Middlemarch,* reference is made to the unsatisfactory "girlish instruction" given to the serious and purposeful Dorothea. Rosamond's years of instruction in the womanly pursuits of singing, embroidery, dressing well, social deportment, lead to another kind of inadequacy. A contemporary tract by Maria Grey alleged that the curriculum was such that women "are not educated to be wives, but to get husbands" (*The Education of Women,* 1871).

George Eliot's connection with the "woman question" remained equivocal. Though she showed support for The Married Women's Property Bill and was a good friend to several activists of the time, she never joined the women's movement directly. At one level, Eliot's preferences were academic. Louis Martin's book *The Civilisation of*

The Human Race by Woman (1842) met with lavish praise from Eliot. She was never a mother and does not seem to have regretted such a fate, yet she wrote enthusiastically to the American author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, saying, "You have had longer experience than I as a writer, and fuller experience as a woman, since you have borne children and know the mother's history from the beginning." Eliot's sympathy for women, limited by their circumstances, is evident in much of her personal correspondence and her *Journals*. At the same time she will not compromise professional standards by making concessions for women writers. The ironic piece called "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" debunks the myth of a happy marriage being the "desirable consummation" of all ambition (*Westminister Review*, 66,1856).

The frame of the women's question can be placed around the novel *Middlemarch* to bring focus to an understanding of freedom and "choice." At least three issues were found to be determining factors: education, inheritance, attitude to domesticity.

However, there is a further aspect. As you review Books Three and Four of *Middlemarch*, you will find men characters revealing their thoughts in relation to their activities and ambitions. By focusing on the following passages, review the attitudinal difference caused by the difference in gender.

- Caleb Garth speaking to Fred Vincy says, "A good deal of what I know can only come from experience: you can't learn it off as you learn things out of a book"(606).

- Lydgate wonders about "sacrificing" time given to his scientific experiments in attending to Rosamond's "little claims": "To Lydgate it seemed that he had been spending month after month in sacrificing more than half of his best intent and best power to his tenderness to Rosamond" (632).

- Bulstrode recalls his early years of cleverness and cunning. "The terror of being judged sharpens the memory: it sends an inevitable glare over that long unvisited past which has been habitually recalled only in general phrases" (663).

- Will Ladislaw, a man without a vocation or profession, can freely indulge in poetic notions. He tells Dorothea, " I shall go on living as a man might do who had seen heaven in a trance"(681).

Contrast the separate, designated roles by which men and women arrange their lives. You will participate in the debates on the "woman question" in George Eliot's time if you see how priorities are decided by societal expectations. Can women be agents of reform in such a context?

4.4 USING THE GOTHIC

Middlemarch, is firmly grounded in contemporary debates between 'individual' and 'corporate' ideals as Terry Eagleton points out. The "woman question" was an aspect of this debate since change in the position of women would have visible and immediate effect on family structures which formed the core of society. However the classic realism of the principal plot of *Middlemarch* is offset by Eliot's use of Gothic elements in the story of Bulstrode and Raffles. Will Ladislaw is to gain prominence as the story proceeds to its denouement. By means of a far-fetched connection with Will's ancestry and Bulstrode's criminal past, the sinister Raffles enters the scene. The gothic is traditionally associated with heightened emotions expressed through exaggerated characters set in a place where the supernatural elements have a free play. The extraordinary happenings are later explained by natural causes. One can expect a fair amount of drama, mystery, violence, coincidences. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) are good examples of the genre.

Read the section describing the meeting of Ladislaw and Raffles in Chapter 59. Ladislaw is suddenly accosted by a scruffy looking man who speaks in crude language and occasionally winks to make a point. He hints at knowledge about mysterious events in the past relating to Will's unknown origins. He says just enough to establish credibility but not enough to satisfy curiosity. He would also like to cadge a drink, perhaps try blackmailing. The person being mentioned is Will's mother, therefore the young man is understandably perturbed. Raffles came from nowhere, and just as suddenly, he moves out of the plot. But he has been a useful device for creating a sufficient disturbance in the plot. Raffles turns out to be the link between Bulstrode and Will Ladislaw and the major plot moves towards a resolution.

By the use of a gothic figure, George Eliot triggers off further developments in the classic-realist plot. Bulstrode's psychological reactions to the threat of his past being revealed are presented in fine language:

> Night and Day, while the resurgent threatening past was making a conscience within him, he was thinking by what means he could recover peace and trust—by what sacrifice he could stay the rod. His belief in these moments was, that if he spontaneously did something right, God would save him from the consequence of wrong-doing. For religion can only change when the emotions that fill it are changed; and the religion of personal fear remains nearly at the level of the savage (668-669).

Attempting to enact his thoughts which are verging on good intentions, he seeks an interview with Will Ladislaw. The dramatic confrontation between the old banker and the young, freewheeling artist has a taut quality of tension. Refer to Chapter 61. The jigsaw puzzle of the past gradually becomes a clear picture. Here one looks for a juxtaposition of the real and the gothic.

4.5 A CRITICAL CHANGE

What is there in that past? As a young man, Bulstrode had married an older woman, Mrs. Dunkirk, the wealthy widow of a man with whom he had worked in an unscrupulous, pawnbroker's business. Before marrying him Mrs. Dunkirk had wanted to find her runaway daughter and her son. With an eye on the Dunkirk fortune, Bulstrode had bribed Raffles — the only other person to know Sarah's whereabouts — to keep silent. When Mrs. Dunkirk died, Bulstrode as her husband inherited all her money. Moving to the provincial town of *Middlemarch* he had married Harriet Vincy and become a wealthy and apparently respectable banker.

Bulstrode tells much of this story to Will Ladislaw. Raffles' whispered query, "Excuse me, Mr. Ladislaw—was your mother's name Sarah Dunkirk?" (657) suddenly has a new and disconcerting meaning for Ladislaw. The confrontation between the old and the young Will remind you of other such contrasted pairs earlier in the novel. Here the hierarchy does not determine power relations though Bulstrode imagines that his age and his wealth will grant superiority. Will angrily rejects his offer of money to amend the wrongdoings of the past: "My unblemished honour is important to me. It is important to me to have no stain on my birth and connections.... You shall keep your ill-begotten money."(672).

The legitimizing of Will Ladislaw marks an important transition in the plot. For one, he becomes worthy of "respect" in a society which insists upon a knowledge of family connections and distrusts strangers. Moreover, his suit to Dorothea now becomes a possibility in his own eyes. But let us examine a larger issue of ideology in the novel emerging from a conflict between the individual and society. Ladislaw undergoes a more critical change, circumstantially and personally, than any other character in the novel. He embodies the change visible in Eliot's time caused by the

clash of many interests. The legitimizing curbs Will's bohemian tendency but he does not become a conservative. His radicalism finds a useful political meaning in the Reform era. Also, in rejecting the old banker's offer of money, Ladislaw strikes a blow at hierarchical structures, both personal and institutional. George Eliot, one can surmise, was progressive in her ideology but in favour of ameliorative processes that were gentle, not abrupt.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

Terry Eagleton's important essay, "George Eliot : Ideology and Literary form", alleges that the author diffuses and represses the "potential tragic collision between 'corporate' and 'individualist' ideologies". You have examined the criticism in terms of the text. It has been suggested to you that Eliot is aware of the conflict and therefore in control of the narrative. The unresolved confusion of "values" adds to the richness of the novel. Further, you have been given information on contemporary debates relating to the "Woman Question". Engaged though she was with the live issues of her time, George Eliot weighed her responses very carefully. Through the destiny of Dorothea, key concepts about education and inheritance enter the novel, *Middlemarch*. In addition, a clever juxtaposition of polyphonous voices in the community create an alternative set of arguments. As the novel moves towards a donouement—not a "resolution"— George Eliot uses some structural devices such as the 'gothic' to bring about a connectedness in the details of the plot.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. Sum up the main argument in Terry Eagleton's criticism of George Eliot and give your own assessment of his views.

   Critically examine George Eliot's response to the issues raised by the "Woman Question". How does this reflect in the text of *Middlemarch* with reference to Dorothea's widowed condition?

2. Write a short note on Raffles, mentioning the gothic elements in this part of the story.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

John Peck, ed., George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New Casebooks). Macmillan 1992. Contains the extract by Terry Eagleton, "George Eliot : Ideology and Literary Form", from Eagleton's book, *Criticism and Ideology*. Verso, 1976.
Dorothea Barrett, Vocation and Desire : George Eliot's Heroines. London : Routledge, 1989.
Christina Crosby, The Ends of History : Victorians and "The Woman Question". London : Routledge, 1990

UNIT 5 THE FINALE

Structure

5.0 Objectives

5.1 Reforms

5.1.1 Money

5.2 Figurality

5.3 Minor Characters

5.4 The Finale

5.5 Let Us Sum Up

5.6 Questions

5.7 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The emphasis in this Unit is upon the exquisite structure of *Middlemarch* in which Eliot takes care to relate every part to the whole. Linking motifs are several. You begin by identifying two of them, reforms, and Money. Keeping the historical developments in view, George Eliot delineates several problems of a society in rapid transition as opportunities in business and politics shake the foundations of traditional value systems. Another device for creating a cohesive structure is the use of metaphor. While many critics have examined the figurality of the "web" as a central metaphor in the text and shown how it may be rendered also as labyrinth, organic tissue, or woven fabric, J. Hillis Miller's influential essay on "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*" is examined in some detail. The concluding chapters of the novel once again remind us of the position of Dorothea struggling to understand her complex psycho-social self in the context of community and history.

5.1 REFORMS

Towards the end of the novel, several disparate strains are brought into conjunction. One principal link is the idea of "Reform."Let us see how this is effected.

- Reform in the political governance of England was hotly debated in George Eliot's time. The first Reform Bill is the immediate reference in several sections of *Middlemarch* pertaining to Mr. Brooke and Will Ladislaw.

Historically the Bill was necessitated chiefly by glaring inequalities in representation between traditionally enfranchised rural areas and the rapidly growing cities of newly industrial England. For example, such large industrial centres as Birmingham and Manchester were unrepresented, while Parliamentary members continued to be returned from numerous so-called "rotten boroughs," which were virtually uninhabited rural districts, and from " pocket boroughs," where a single powerful landowner or peer could almost completely control the voting. The first Reform Bill was introduced into the House of Commons in March 1831. The Bill became law in

1832. The First Reform Act reformed the antiquated electoral system in Britain by redistributing seats and changing the conditions of franchise....Although the bill left the working class and a large section of the lower middle class without a vote , it gave the new middle classes a share in responsible government and thus quieted the political agitation that might have led to revolution. (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 1997).

Reform in medicine was an important development in Europe. In the novel, George Eliot localises the issues by showing debates about the proposed Fever Hospital in *Middlemarch*. Lydgate has brought in ideas for systematising medical practice but he is opposed by the traditional doctors and their patients who have become accustomed to a simple, direct relationship. In Chapter 45 we are told:

> The Hospital was to be reserved for fever in all its forms; Lydgate was to be the chief medical superintendent, that he might have free authority to pursue all comparative investigations which his studies, particularly in Paris , had shown him the importance of, the other medical visitors having a consultative influence, but having no power to contravene Lydgate's ultimate decisions; and the general management to be lodged exclusively in the hands of five directors associated with Mr. Bulstrode (493).

Reform for Dorothea is linked to the betterment of the lives of the poor. It was a vision of social welfare more associated with religious fervour that secular planning. Initially, the St. Theresa image had been invoked, at the end of the novel, Dorothea is compared to Virgin Mary (826). However, Dorothea's plans for executing reform (refer to the last section of *Middlemarch*) are formulated with strict adherence to the realm of possibility. She relies on the solidity of the drawing board and a bank account:

> I wished to raise money and pay it off gradually out of my income which I don't want, to buy land with and found a village which should be a school of industry; but Sir James and my uncle have convinced me that the risk would be too great. So you see that what I should most rejoice at would be to have something good to do with my money: I should like to make other people's lives better to them. It makes me very uneasy—coming all to me who don't want it. (822)

Another linking device is the motif of Money.

Lydgate and Bulstrode have a common cause in working towards the new Hospital. However the unpopularity of the idea of streamlined medical services that will establish professionalism beyond personal contacts puts Lydgate's career in jeopardy. The old doctors in Middlemarch get their usual, rich, patients; Lydgate's clients are the poor and the needy. Meanwhile Rosamond's refined education and her consequent expectations of an elaborate household have placed Lydgate in debt. As these details of expenditure mount and Lydgate succumbs to his wife's whims over and over again, we are reminded of the early description of Lydgate's "spots of commonness." Hoping to retrieve his economic condition, however partially, he approaches Bulstrode for a loan but is brusquely turned down. Lydgate speaks openly, as to a benefactor. " I have slipped into money difficulties which I can see no way out of, unless someone who trusts me and my future will advance me a sum without security"(736).

Soon, matters take another turn because Raffles appears on the scene. The past of Bulstrode gets connected with the Lydgate-Rosamand story because Lydgate finds his medical career fatally linked to the deception of Bulstrode. Unable to persuade Ladislaw to be bribed into silence, Bulstrode turns his attention to Raffles. In rapid, dramatic developments, Raffles sinks into a coma. Bulstrode summons Lydgate to attend to the patient. As Bulstrode is apparently supervising the care of the patient, the ministration of the drugs is under his instruction. Raffles dies and with him the

gory details of Bulstrode's past are stifled . But the doctor is surprised about the unexpected end of Raffles.

> He was uneasy about this case. He had not expected it to terminate as it had done. Yet he hardly knew how to put a question on the subject to Bulstrode without appearing to insult him; or if he examined the housekeeper—why the man was dead. There seemed no use in implying that somebody's ignorance or imprudence had killed him. And after all he himself might be wrong(765).

Despite Raffle's death, Bulstrode's past keeps raising its ugly head. The scandal concerning the banker and the doctor is fed by gossip , fanned by rumours. George Eliot, in the details, shows the conservative preferences of small town people who easily cast aspersions on the strangers who came to settle in Middlemarch. The public indictment of Bulstrode is a marvellous scene of rhetoric and drama. Please refer to Chapter 71. Says Mr. Hawley representing the voice of the community, " It is our united sentiment that Mr. Bulstrode should be called upon—and I do now call upon him—to resign public positions which he holds not simply as a tax-payer, but as a gentleman among gentlemen. There are practices and there are acts which, owing to circumstances, the law cannot visit, though they may be worse than many things that are legally punishable" (780).

Along with Bulstrode, Lydgate loses his reputation and social standing. Dorothea, who recognises the professional excellence and the basic goodness of Lydgate sets herself the task of clearing his damaged reputation. Thereby another link is established between the Lydgate-Rosamond plot and Dorothea's story. Will Ladislaw becomes a further inadvertent factor because of his flirtations with Rosamond. From your familiarity with the plot of *Middlemarch*, you would have learnt of the several ways in which the doctor and Dorothea get into sporadic connections. He is as much an essential part of her story as she is of his. He is often an agent in those parts of the action of the novel that concern her ideals of "duty." Initially, the reason is his medical attendance during Casaubon's illness and his sympathetic understanding of Dorothea's helplessness and dismay at her husband's poor state of health. At the end of the story, we witness her courageous faith in Lydgate when almost everybody else is against him.

This segment is a corrective to the overriding emphasis placed on money in many of the intervening episodes. Dorothea becomes an agent of moral transformation in Lydgate, Rosamund and Will Ladislaw. This is almost a conscious act as she disciplines her mind, "She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be the turning point in three lives...which were touching hers with the solemn neighbourhood of danger and distress" (854). She acts out her thoughts systematically and with a quiet grace:

- Dorothea encourages Lydgate to pursue his scientific goals even as she places monetary resources within his means. To some extent, she cures him of his spots of commonness, as though theirs roles were reversed and she had turned healer and he, the patient.

- She visits Rosamond with the intention of showing her the worth of her husband, helping her to understand the vicissitudes of marriage, and making her realise the joint responsibility that devolves upon a couple to protect their relationship. In a highly charged scene where Rosamond's posturing is abandoned and she becomes trully "natural," the women establish a bond that breaks through the customary barriers of rank and class. (854-858)

An unexpected consequence of the visit to Rosamond is the clearing of Dorothea's misapprehensions about Will Ladislaw. The proprieties that he seemed to have neglected are now said to be no more than accidents of circumstance. Far from Ladislaw playing suit to Rosamond, he had come to tell Rosamond of his deep

affection and admiration for Dorothea. The intensity of the scene had caused Dorothea to misunderstand the relationship. Dorothea came to declare Lydgate's integrity, but she finds to her own joy that Rosamond clears Will of any guilty association.

- Money is discussed in poignant terms when Will and Dorothea take courage to declare their love for one another. They may be socially ostracised, she will loose her inheritance from Casaubon, but they have discovered the mutuality of their affection. "I don't mind about poverty—I hate my wealth," she says with "young passion" (870). As in her meticulous planning for the rural poor, she quickly works her way through the reality of her resources. She said in a sobbing childlike way, "We could live quite well on my fortune—it is too much—seven hundred a year—I want so little—no new clothes—and I will learn what everything costs." (870)

It would be wrong to imagine that George Eliot was endorsing Dorothea's naïve disregard for the material basis of life. This shows in the selectivity of her words "young" and " childlike." On the other hand, Dorothea's moral standards are upheld whereby money should not become the dominant argument of life.

5.2 FIGURALITY

The linguistic texture of *Middlemarch* is permeated with figurality. It is present both as poetic, metaphoric imagery as also through the vocabulary and technicality of science. Let us consider some of the prominent examples:

The web as metaphor for social organisation has been seen by critics to be a dominant image. The web is a network and allows us to relate its structure to a spider's web or to woven cloth or to a labyrinth. A web, as you can imagine, consists of fragile nodal points delicately connected to one another. A tug or disturbance at one place will certainly cause reciprocal disturbances elsewhere. Excessive violence would destroy the structure of the web but a gentle pull will cause a temporary shift which will, later, return to the original position. These details must be kept in mind to reflect on the operative aspects of the metaphor.

The groups of characters presented separately and in unison are like the node of a web. Yet one cannot be sure where the node extends into the thread. Similarly, one story flows into the other through plot connectedness. But there are thematic connections too. As J. Hillis Miller points out in an excellent essay on *Middlemarch*, called "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*" says, " Another important use of the metaphor of a web is made in the description of Lydgate's scientific researches. Lydgate's attempt to find the 'primitive tissue' is based on the assumption that the metaphor of the woven cloth applies in the organic as well as the social realm. His use of the figure brings into open the parallelism between Eliot's aim as a sociologist of provincial life and the aims of contemporary biologists."

For textual reference you could locate the web-imagery when we are told that Lydgate gets caught in the hampering thread-like pressure of Middlemarch life. Rosamond is shown spinning a web of romance, weaving 'a little future' with Lydgate at its centre (Chapter 12). In Dorothea's case the web comes to have associations with the labyrinth. As a young girl she finds herself "hemmed in by a social labyrinth which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses -- a walled-in maze of small paths that led no wither" (129).

J. Hillis Miller astutely points out that the dominant metaphors are often contradicted by suggestions of an opposite kind. The web or the labyrinth, images of entrapment or imprisonment are used often regarding Dorothea's plight. At the same time optical imagery as of light in windows (a means of looking out from one's prison) is given

special significance. The reconciliation with Will happens near a light from a window and the last book of *Middlemarch* has the title, "Sunset and Sunrise." Dorothea has another "prison" too, her special kind of blindness which leads to errors of judgement. Because imprisonment and blindness both have to do with the lack of light, the "metaphor of vision" (J. Hillis Miller) in the novel denotes enlightenment and also the crumbling of prison walls. One of Ladislaw's functions in the novel is to replace with light the darkness which Dorothea experienced with Casaubon.

The use of scientific vocabulary and imagery applies also to the changing relationship between Lydgate and Rosamond as their incompatibility and disagreements make them like creatures from different species. Rosamond's predatory power, her eventual survival as the 'fitter' of the two, is described in a novel by way of images from biology and zoology. Thus Lydgate's circumstances at a late stage in the novel are said to be as noxious as an inlet of mud to a creature used to breathing and surviving in the clearest of waters. At another place we are told that Lydgate lay blind and unconcerned as a "jelly-fish which gets melted without knowing it." (271). By contrast, Rosamond is seen as a "torpedo" whose benumbing contact paralyses Lydgate.

We should also note the use of water imagery, often given as a stream flowing haltingly, or alternatively, as a swift current. Water gives a suggestion of connectedness similar to a web but it is an element traditionally associated with the "flow" of human destiny. In his essay "Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy" Mark Schorer finds in *Middlemarch* many metaphors of unification, representing yearnings, and quite a few metaphors of anti-thesis, representing a recognition of fact. Schorer's view is that everyone and everything in the novel is in a state of flux, moving along a "way".

Let us look at a prominent example of metaphor in Chapter 36:

> Young love-making—that gossamer web! Even the points it clings to—the things whence its subtle interlacings are swung—are scarely perceptible; momentary touches of fingertips, meetings of rays from blue and dark orbs, unfinished phrases, lightest changes of cheek and lip, faintest tremors. The web itself is made of spontaneous beliefs....

In the above passage, the web, the woven cloth, the light, become linked analogies. The sense of bonding has the illusion of permanence. The author's imagery calls up a host of cultural and literary associations by which the reader understands the nature of the illusion even if the characters within the book do not.

J. Hillis Miller makes another vital point about the imagery which, he says, helps George Eliot to create a totalising image of society: "The special mode of totalisation in *Middlemarch* is this combination of specificity, on the one hand, and on the other hand, generalising interpretation on the basis of specificity."

5.3 MINOR CHARACTERS

The generalising can be seen in the quick pen portraits of the minor characters. Mrs. Cadwallader, Mr. Brooke, Sir James Chettam, Celia Brooke, Caleb Garth and Mrs. Bulstrode can be taken as representing character traits that constitute the diverse forces in a society. They do not unfold an inner life in a complex and sustained way but are given dramatic moments that capture an essence of thought or feeling. We shall take a quick look at some of their distinctive qualities.

Mrs. Cadwallader is shrewd and talkative and is full of 'worldly' wisdom. Her pitiless remarks spare only a few. She is appropriately

Mrs. Fitchett, the lodge-keeper at Tipton. Mr. Brooke is well-meaning in a sweeping sort of way but mostly ineffective. His is a "too rambling habit of mind." A man of acquiescent temper and miscellaneous opinions, the local political issues rendered though his interpretation are happily caught in a profusion of ideas. Celia Brooke is a conventional young woman seeking the time-honoured comforts of a husband and the domestic hearth. She finds the right match in the traditionally minded Sir James Chettam whose "amiable vanity" make him "a blooming Englishman of the red - whiskered type." Caleb Garth, whose simplicity and goodness offers a foil to a number of others, remains emblematic of the positive value of work. Mrs. Bulstrode receives little attention until very late in the novel but in Chapter 74, she suddenly comes to be the centre of attention. In her husband's disgrace she is shown as behaving bravely and admirably and this gives her story threads of associative connection with the suffering of other women as wives controlled by the decisions of their men.

The minor characters help to reinforce the organicist dimension of the novel. As Sally Shuttleworth says in an essay "*Middlemarch* : An Experiment in Time", George Eliot was influenced not only by Darwin but also, more immediately, by Lewes's studies on the subject. "The purpose behind her labour also corresponds to that of scientific practice for the aim of science, Lewes suggests is to link together, through imaginative construction, the fragments of the phenomenal world so as to reveal an underlying order".

The same principle of organic interdependence applies to physiological life, language, social relations, and historical developments The structure of *Middlemarch* reflects this principle.

5.4 THE FINALE

The ending of *Middlemarch* takes the story into projections of the future. Dorothea is "absorbed into the life of another." The author rhetorically asks what else was it in her power to do.

The Finale in complementary to the Prelude about St. Theresa, the "foundress of nothing." After reading *Middlemarch* with care, would you subscribe to this view?

One should be aware by now of the dynamic quality of George Eliot's writing. Critics of the older viewpoint have mentioned her universalising tendencies, her transcendence of history, her humanism and moral priorities. Recent critics have preferred to see energetic conflict of ideas, contrapuntal forces, divergences, tensions and subversions in the text.

However one factor remains indisputable, that Eliot was a self-conscious artist carefully crafting her text and that she wished to engage active participation from her readers in the full understanding of her story set in the Reform era in England. Though readers today are removed from her in time and history, and social forces have other directions, the reader is still intrigued by the openness that *Middlemarch* has as it invites mediation. As David Lodge says, "*Middlemarch* has achieved a unique status as both paradigm and paragon in discussion of the novel as a literary form."

5.5 LET US SUM UP

The historical timeframe of the novel determines several aspects of the story. You may wish to recapitulate the particulars relating to the passage of the first Reform Bill which changed the voting patterns and power structures in England. The echoes of altered political system were felt in other arenas of community existence.

of politics, family, domesticity, community, business enterprise, scientific innovations. By a brilliant use of metaphor of the web, George Eliot is able to suggest that civic society is based on organic, yet tenuous and shifting principles. J. Hillis Miller not only reiterates the traditional praise granted to Eliot for the super structuring of this novel, but also builds a further argument for metaphors of light that counterbalance the "web".

Consequently, though there is a "finale" to Dorothea's story in her marriage to Will Ladislaw, an intricate link is established with Lydgate's research on "primitive tissue" and Bulstrode's inability to escape the past.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Consider how the subject of "reform" is related to various segments of society in *Middlemarch.*

2. How do conflicting attitudes to money determine the relationship of Lydgate and Rosamund?

3. Discuss the metaphor of the web in the context of events and people relating to Bulstrode.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*", published in John Peck, ed., *Middlemarch* (New Casebooks, 1992).
George R. Creeger, *George Eliot : A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall, 1970.
Gordon S. Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism.* Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

What follows is a "Selected Bibliography". These books are very useful and you may like to refer to them. They are not compulsory but reading some of them will help you to understand *Middlemarch* and George Eliot better.

Hardy, Barbara, ed. "*Middlemarch*" : *Critical Approaches to the Novel.* London : University of London, The Athlone Press, 1967.
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